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# ***AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP (Queensland Chapter)***

## **FUTURE OF THE CONSTITUENCY MP**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**MONDAY, 22 JULY 2024**

**Brisbane**

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**Mr SPEAKER:** Good evening, everybody—or ‘afternoon’, I should say. I am a Far North Queenslander so whenever it gets this dark this early I tend to think it is a bit later in the evening.

I would like to firstly respectfully acknowledge that we are gathered this evening on the land of Aboriginal people and pay my respects to elders past and present. I thank those First Australians for their careful custodianship of the land over countless generations. In this country of ours we are very fortunate to have two of the world’s oldest continuing living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

I am going to make some acknowledgements. We were going to have Di McCluskey here but, unfortunately, she is unable to be here this evening. In her stead we have former chair David Fraser; Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe, the member for Sandgate; Amanda Camm, the member for Whitsunday; and Glen Elmes, the President of the Former Parliamentary Members Association. Our other guest is Dr Pandanus Petter from Griffith University.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you and I appreciate being able to make a couple of opening remarks. I apologise that I cannot stay for the entire program this evening. I need to leave at roughly 6 pm. Hopefully, I will get to hear from the speakers, and then the panel conversation that will ensue will have to be left to others.

It is important to note that the ASPG is a very important part of having a non-government entity have independent scrutiny of our independent institutions. It is important because public policy is the mainstay of good government. We are seeing that in action today with the first estimates hearing, although it is a little bit less so when it is the Speaker being challenged rather than the main show tomorrow with the Premier and the Treasurer. We will certainly see how that goes.

I have always believed that the ASPG is a really important part of what we do. I am fortunate because I am going to head to Sydney next week to participate with the ASPG in New South Wales about something that Queensland is fairly uniquely able to talk about, which of course is the important theme of bicameralism versus unicameralism. I have never had anyone tell me that they would like to see more politicians in Queensland so I think reviving the upper house could be a bit of a problem.

I hope you all enjoy this evening. As Speaker, it is my job to ensure that you feel welcome here at Queensland parliament, the people’s house. I trust that the conversations and the questions will be both enriching and educational all at once. Thanks very much.

**Mr FRASER:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I think I said it when I was the chair of this group: your support has been most welcome and very much appreciated over the years that you have held the role. The fact that you have cooperated so much with our group over such a long period has made our existence a hell of a lot easier than it might otherwise have been.

My name is David Fraser. Diana cannot be here tonight to welcome you so she has asked me to stand in her place and do some of what I might term the administrative things. Because I have not done it for a while, I am going to have to read some of them.

As the Speaker has already mentioned, we are lucky to have with us tonight three well-qualified speakers: Dr Petter, Stirling Hinchliffe and Amanda Camm, who will give their perspectives on the important topic before us tonight.

There are a couple of housekeeping matters that I have to raise with you. Our proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and there will be a transcript available on the ASPG website in some period after tonight’s meeting. Could you please turn off or turn down your mobile phones if you have them. If you require restrooms—this is most important: out the door, turn right and then turn left and you will come upon them. In the unlikely event of an emergency, please follow the directions that will emanate from somewhere in the ceiling.

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I now introduce our master of ceremonies for the evening, Glen Elmes. As some of you know, Glen is the former member for Noosa and the current president of the past members association. It gives me great pleasure tonight to introduce your chairman, Glen Elmes.

**Mr ELMES:** Thanks very much, David. Thank you for that round of applause. I hope I get a similar round of applause at the end of tonight's proceedings, which will mean that it has all gone well.

We have some great speakers tonight and I am personally looking forward to hearing from them. Pandanus is going to speak for 10 minutes and Amanda and Stirling will speak for five minutes each. Rather than taking questions during those three presentations, I am hoping that we might keep the questions till the end because we are on a fairly tight timeframe. That will allow for a bit of an exchange of ideas at the end of the evening, which will be great. At this juncture, I introduce Dr Pandanus Petter, who will lead us off with the first presentation.

**Dr PETTER:** Thank you all for coming along today. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners as well and acknowledge that there were political systems here long before European settlement.

I am going to talk a little today about the paper that the ASPG was kind enough to give me a cash prize for, which was very helpful as a student at the time. The paper is about constituency work and about a particular academic argument but also I think one that socially resonates with people. It is the idea that politicians or political parties or our institutions are out of touch and disconnected and do not understand everyday people. We hear it every day. We hear it in the arguments of populist politicians, we hear it from mainstream politicians as well every now and again, and we hear it from the public. In the case of this paper, I was having an argument with other academics who also believe that.

Put simply, the idea of the democratic void is that in the good old days, or in the old days at least, political parties used to have these big memberships that allowed them to be organically connected with the public and everyday people. You would have a Labor Party connected to the working class and a Liberal party that may be connected to small business and other members of the public but a distinct social group.

Then there is the idea that maybe sometime in the fifties, the sixties or the seventies, the society becomes more complex, fewer people identify that way and parties try to be everything to everybody. They become what are called catch-all parties. It is trying to say, 'We can represent the interests of society generally' or specific groups within it as well. During the sixties, when you had these more social movements coming around, they would say, 'Well, we can be an honest broker between all these different interests in society and do things.'

Then, the argument goes, over time they become more professionalised in their connections. Their party membership starts to dwindle a bit. It becomes less important. The party in public office, that is, the members of parliament, become more powerful in relation to them. You would not see a party branch dismissing a member of parliament too often these days whereas you might have expected it in the past. They use indirect means of talking to the public, so talking to the mass of people through the media, through professionalised election campaigns and those sorts of things. There is this idea that they are interested in winning over the public but not so much interested in connecting with them. This is the sort of argument.

Then it comes to the nineties and the two thousands—something like that. In the late eighties, in Europe especially, they started getting a lot more public funding, and we saw it here for parties. They did not need a mass party membership to give them money anymore as they could get their money from the state. The idea there is that they do not need the people anymore. They do not know how to connect with them anymore. They connect more with each other as members of parliament than they do the public. That is the idea. The public, as well, has become less engaged with political parties. It is more interested in social movements or giving their opinion through opinion polls or signing petitions—those kinds of alternative ways of communicating with the public.

One consequence of that is that members of parliament are better resourced than they used to be in the past. They have more money to perform this connection role. They are expected to work longer hours and are more embedded in their constituency than in the past. It is something that was a very dramatic turn for politicians in the UK who used to maybe go to their constituency once a year if they had to. Then suddenly they had to go there every week and do things at night and all of these kinds of things. It was very shocking to them. In Australia, members of parliament have been a bit more embedded in the constituency for a long time. That is the sort of background of it.

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I was arguing against this idea that there is a mutual disengagement with the public less interested and the parties less interested. I am seeing members of parliament are working longer hours than ever. They are in their constituency more often. They are talking to people probably a lot more than any everyday person does. They talk to a lot of different people in society. So how can we say they are disconnected? I thought, well, okay, working hard does not necessarily mean it is a meaningful kind of connection that they are building.

I used this framework called the 'connection building framework', which says representation at the constituency level happens and performs four functions. I will probably lose you all here, but it is what the paper is.

You have political connections or policy connections, where you want to know what people think about public issues or you want to persuade them that your party has the best perspective or you have the best perspective. You might talk to the public or send them a survey saying, 'What do you think about this or that?' You might meet with public servants or experts who know about these kinds of things and you make it known to people that you are this expert on policy.

Another way is service connections. So that is looking out for particular ways you can give your constituents something from the government or from the state. They might come to you with problems—I am sure our MPs know all about this—and ask you to fix them and you say, 'I'll see what I can do.' You are also collecting information about what are the service problems out there and what can be done about them. Is it one person's problem, a whole street's problem or a whole neighbourhood's problem? You can do that in a number of different ways.

The other one is symbolic connections, which is mostly about building meaningful personal connection with the constituency saying, 'I'm like you. You can trust me. I'm one of you. I represent a real place with real people in it.' Often in political science we think of it as trust building, but I tend to think of it as being a two-way street where they are actually building a sense of community among the people they represent as well. Constituency is lines on a map to most people. They might not even know which one they are in, but if you can persuade them that you represent a vibrant community it shows that you are connected to it and that there is something there to connect to.

The other kind of connection is probably the least popular kind and that is the partisan connection, where you say, 'I am a member of a party. My party is relevant to the people I represent,' or 'It's better than the other guys.' You might do that by connecting with your local grassroots, which is the thing we expect to be the least important in this day and age, because there are fewer members and they tend to be of more restricted demographics than in the past, but they are still important because they can cause you problems or give you good feedback.

The other way to connect through your party identity is with other MPs. Something I found in my research is that a lot of MPs will actually do this. They work with either their federal member or other state members and local members to build this connection and tell the community, 'We are a united team. We are all here to help you out.' They might all go to a mobile office together and be like, 'If you have a federal problem I'll help. If you have a state problem, we can help.'

I was looking at those connections and I talked to 20 MPs from Queensland to understand what their priorities are—what kind of work they put in and how they do it. Do they do it in a way which we would expect—in a void, where it is not really meaningful or is mostly driven with elites or is not interested in transformative change? I went around and talked to them and I said, 'What do you like to do? What is your electorate like? Who is important? What would you do differently, if you could?' This was to understand what they spend time doing, what they think is important and what are the challenges et cetera.

In general, I found that everyone spent a lot of time on the symbolic and the service connection building. One of the most important activities everyone told me is to just get out and about. For the member for Gregory, that might mean flying from Emerald to Birdsville or driving from town to town for weeks. For the member for South Brisbane, that might mean driving frequently around the smallest electorate in the city. It is just being out and about, being where the people are and connecting with them.

The other ones are service connections. Lots and lots of people come to your office wanting help with things or you go to them to find out what they want. I found as well that people were actually interested in policy connections. To a far degree, more than you might expect in a void, they are actually interested in finding out what people care about in terms of policy issues, trying to persuade them and that kind of thing.

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Most of them probably preferred to find problems to solve rather than problems to highlight, but you will find shadow ministers, crossbenchers and other people who are looking for problems to highlight in the community to say, 'There are problems here. I can help you fix them,' or 'We should do something about them politically.'

The least important were the party connections, although I still find a lot of evidence of people using them to support all their other connections. You might have local party members help you out at community events or you might work as a team to say, 'Labor'—or Liberal, whoever—'cares about this community. We're here to help you.' Despite this expectation of a void where people and politicians are disengaged, I actually found that the politicians are trying as hard as they can to connect with as many people as possible. I will finish there before I lose my voice totally!

**Mr ELMES:** You did very well. You can have another couple of drinks now! Good on you. Thank you, Pandanus. Our next speaker is Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe, who is retiring. He is one of those MPs who gets to choose the time of his leaving the parliament, which is always good. He came into the parliament at the same time as I did, in 2006. Five minutes, Stirling.

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** Thank you, Glen. You saved me by not mentioning the gap I did have in my service! I join the Speaker and Pan in acknowledging the First Nations people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who might be with us today.

I found Pan's paper really very interesting. Despite the fact that I am a bit of a public policy wonk and a bit of a political wonk, I had not come across this democratic void theory before reading the paper—I have since gone on and looked at some other things—but it really struck me as being an issue of other places. The work that Pan had done highlighted how this was not part of our experience. I guess I wanted to give a bit of context to the constituency MP experience in Queensland—a bit of a broader history of the expectations.

As was alluded to by Pan in relation to, say, the UK in more recent times, once upon a time, MPs—even in Queensland—were figures whose role existed only in parliament and maybe vaguely as some sort of local personality or dignitary who presented prizes at the show or something. We have moved on from that sort of experience to now where there is this higher immediate expectation, particularly online, for quick turnaround responses to emerging issues.

The role of a constituency MP has had quite a significant change in that timeframe. Before the existence of electorate offices—and I will come back to that in a moment—MPs' homes were the place for surgeries. It was acknowledged many years ago that the spouses of police officers in country areas did the secretarial work, so they were paid an allowance. The reality was that it was the spouses of MPs—and let's be clear and honest that, at that time, it was the wives of MPs—who took on a lot of information and did a lot of work for the MP when people would come to visit their home. It was not until a little over 50 years ago, in 1973, that electorate offices were first created here in Queensland. Since then, we have seen an expansion from one officer to two officers in the early 2000s and then to three officers very recently. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your advocacy in that regard.

In my time as a member of parliament, I have seen the change from letters and meetings to email, bulk lobbying and the emergence of social media. In my time as a constituency MP between 2006 and 2009, my first term, email was part of the landscape but it was not ubiquitous and social media was electorally non-existent. It was in my second term—2009 to 2012—that I first joined Twitter, when it was first launched in Australia. I think it was January 2010 when I joined LinkedIn. I did not have much of a presence there until recently. It was not long after that that Facebook became a thing that you were expected to connect to, and the party machines were encouraging people to use it as another way of connection.

Now, during my returned time in parliament—2015 to 2024—there has been inexorable growth in the role of social media as a community space and the expectation that constituency activities happen via that medium. I will give an example from my own community. I did not expect in 2014, when I was a candidate, that I would be expected to join something called Sandgate Mums, but I was quickly accepted because the Sandgate Mums knew that they could send a message to Stirling Hinchliffe, candidate for parliament and then member of parliament, to get information about things and be part of that community.

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During my whole time in parliament, we have also seen a real change in the use of constituent data management programs. The main ones that are used are party-based ones, not the ones that the parliament provides. It also made me reflect very much on what we have seen in terms of that connection with community. I did note Pan's reference to UK politicians. He noticed something that I might make use of a bit later. There was a quote from Rory Stewart that I will come back to.

I did want to particularly note that the key model I have seen and experienced is the harvesting of networks. That builds on all of those elements, not only policy connection but also service connection, symbolic connection and, indeed, partisan connection. They are all part of the harvesting of networks. They are very different activities and dependent on the personality of MPs in the community. I will finish with a quote from Pan's article which highlights this. It states—

While many MPs' behaviour in parliament is structured by party affiliation, in their constituency each develops a distinctive home style of resource allocation and interaction with citizens. This style is influenced by their local political conditions and their own goals.

I thought that was a really apt description of what we see going on in this space. I am happy to be joining the conversation. Thank you.

**Mr ELMES:** Thanks, Stirling. We go now from the south-east corner of the state to the second-best seat in the Queensland parliament after Noosa. It will be interesting to hear from Amanda, being a regional member, about whatever differences she perceives between what is happening in the south-east corner, or the more populated part of the state, compared to a regional centre. Amanda Camm.

**Ms CAMM:** Thank you. Thank you for having me. And thanks to Pan—I did enjoy his research. I am a first-term MP who was also appointed as a shadow minister in my first term. When I consider this concept of constituency, I was confronted very early on with very competing priorities from very diverse constituencies. My local community has a diverse constituency just by its sheer make-up, whether that be the geography or the localities in which I operate, which are vast and varied. I may be a little different from my city counterparts and other parts of Queensland because I have 23-plus schools, three chambers of commerce and two local government areas.

What I have come to learn on reflection of your work, Pan, is that sometimes each constituency disregards the other. I will give you a very clear example. My local constituency probably do not care that I am the shadow minister for domestic and family violence prevention, or child safety or women's economic security. How does that affect them? With me as their local representative, they have an expectation of me. If I look back on the numbers that got me elected, one-third of the people did not vote for me, yet I made a commitment and took an oath to represent the region. I love that we are referred to as the 'member' of the seat that we represent because I think that takes the politics out of it in the first instance, because your first and foremost commitment is to the electorate, to the constituency. That is at the core—you represent all interests. Sometimes the party constituency—the competing priorities of policy or what have you—may disregard whether something is in the interests of your local constituency, even though some of those party members in fact make up your local constituency.

Then we look more broadly at the policy connections. This is an interest I share with Stirling: I am a bit of a policy freak; I love public policy. When you look more broadly at the state interest and at some of the constituencies I have come across that now lobby and advocate en masse with an expectation that they will go through my local electorate office—which is there, in fact, to service my local community—you have competing factors as to why we are not developing or releasing more policy in the interests of that constituency.

My experience was in local government, which was not aligned with party politics. You may be a member of a political party and you declare that interest, as I did, but it does not really play a part in decision-making at a local government level, compared to the experience I have had as a first-term MP. Stirling made a point about the different MP and the individual. I hear lots of people, including my family members, who think politicians are right down the bottom on the trust scale, along with used car salesmen and others, yet when you go out and meet people in your community they will talk about other politicians of various political persuasions, maybe even my own, who they are not fans of—whatever the perception is—but as a local member the feedback you get is quite positive.

I will finish with an experience I have reflected on. I got out of bed very early one morning and attended a local service—it was not on Anzac Day or any of the traditional days but a local service at Bakers Creek—at an air crash memorial. A returned serviceman in his 90s came up to me and said, 'You will never, ever realise the importance of your presence here today and what it means for us.' I did not have to say

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anything or do anything; they felt such gratitude that I had got out of bed. I said to him, 'I feel such gratitude that you continue to get out of bed,' because the job they have done and the service they have provided I think is far more significant than the role that we play. That made me realise that sometimes in this role just turning up goes a long way with the constituency—as well as all of the other expectations that people have that Stirling outlined. Thank you.

**Mr ELMES:** Thanks, Amanda. Ladies and gentlemen, we have 40 minutes set aside for questions. If you want to ask Pan, Amanda or Stirling a question, could you stand in your place and let us know your name and, if you belong to an organisation, the organisation you belong to. With that, I will throw it open to questions.

**QUESTIONER:** Amanda was talking about the respect that politicians have. As Stirling said, it is just above a used car salesperson. You hear the same kind of anecdote about lawyers. People think lawyers are 'a bunch of so-and-sos', except their own lawyer. It is interesting: there is a personal connection with your MP or your lawyer that differentiates you. One of the things I find fascinating is the tension between representing your constituents and party policy issues. I know that a lot of people say that politicians are at their best in a conscience vote. I would like to hear any feedback about how we can elevate the reputation of politicians generally, and is more conscience voting a pathway or not?

**Mr ELMES:** It would be a good idea to hear from both Stirling and Amanda, because they represent parties that have a different view on it.

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** I think the statistics show that it is lawyers then real estate agents then politicians and then used car salesman. Someone I know who was a used car salesman said to me once, 'At least we buy our own stock,' but he was mainly having a go at real estate agents. David, I take your point that the issue of conscience votes and those instances where they occur provide an opportunity for a different insight and reflection on MPs' role as constituency MPs and, equally, their role as individuals.

If you look at surveys of opinions of members of parliament, I think you will find that it is similar in the UK, where, effectively, conscience votes are pretty common. It is definitely the case in the United States, where so-called conscience votes are a constant. There is not much strong whipping that goes on in the US Congress so I do not think that is the thing that drives those issues. If we did not have the same level of party discipline in our system, I wonder whether that would be seen as the issue. It becomes a topic of conversation because it is a rare occurrence. It is a flashpoint of personality and individuality for members.

Having had the experience of being a part of, and having to vote on, three separate instances of conscience votes in parliament in my 18 years of service—that includes the three years I was out—I had positive feedback after the process, even from people who did not like the way I voted in the end. It is demonstrative of an opportunity to engage in a way where the policy connection comes to the top level, rather than those other factors mentioned by Pan.

**Ms CAMM:** I have had the opportunity to exercise only one conscience vote since being elected. That was on the voluntary assisted dying legislation. I agree with Stirling: it is an opportunity to engage at a deeper level with your electorate or your constituency. I was probably on the opposite side of where the electorate wanted me to be, but I could articulate in a very respectful way which acknowledged their viewpoint to validate the perspective that I brought to my conscience vote. I did that in a respectful way and I think people respect that.

Fundamentally, what differentiates us as political movements are the values that underpin each of our political parties. We just had this year's convention. It is all reported in the paper, including some of the policy positions that our grassroots members bring forward. I am normally questioned by a different constituency—that is, my shadow portfolio constituencies—about my views on them. Our policies go through a process and a machine but then the parliamentary team considers all of that as we develop policy. At the end of the day, if policy does not result in the expectation of the grassroots members then I, as a member of the party, can explain that with a clear knowledge and understanding that we connect on shared values. I understand my party constituency because I am one of them. I understand why that policy or position or the values that have informed it are so important to that constituency. I treat that with the same value of respect that I do the constituency I represent as a member of parliament.

It comes back to understanding what those underpinning values are and then how, as a member of a political party and as a member of parliament, you transverse that. In the room there are many who are much more experienced than I am. As MPs we will not always get it right and that is okay. We are human after all. Sometimes we have to remind our broader constituency that we are.

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**Mr ELMES:** Thanks, Amanda. Next question?

**Mr JORGENSEN:** Stirling talked about the rise of social media—how you are expected to interact with it and that it is a main conduit for a lot of discussion. How do you manage the equivalent rise of misinformation and the lobby groups that work on misinformation?

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** My short answer is that you don't; it is extremely hard. Misinformation is not new—it has been happening since even before the printed page—but it certainly travels quicker. One of the things around social media in particular that a lot of people understand—I do not want to presume; I will not talk down to anyone here, but I will take you on the journey. Obviously you have the algorithms that present certain information to reinforce people's positions. That is my experience and what I see, hear and understand about how it works. If someone has a particular view of the world, they are more likely to have information presented to them that confirms their opinion rather than challenges it.

In a pluralist society, I would have hoped that media, in its broadest sense, was about the exchange of ideas and challenging people's ideas, not confirming and reaffirming and narrowing their ideas. That is where the biggest challenge of the social media generation and social media comes in. I think anything that we can do as a community to challenge that—I have been enjoying the fact that News Ltd now campaigns against monopolies. It has been interesting to watch that change in the last few months, because they have realised that much bigger monopolies are coming to eat them and they are fighting back. It is nice to have News Ltd as an ally on something that I believe in.

**Ms CAMM:** Yesterday I had a different experience with social media involving a fellow member of parliament. It was neither of our political parties, so that narrows it down; it was a political party with one member, which gives it away. A local member in my region posted an environmental study that was undertaken by our local council for a coastal community. In that environmental study that was adopted by the council was a report that was just adopted—that they note the report. In that post the member mentioned elements of that report out of context, including retreat of a coastal community.

I was holding a mobile office and forum about some electricity outages that we had. I had my local electricity retailer come along, which was great, to provide some update on the NBN. We had organised this very friendly forum, but I turned up at my local tavern to find 65 very upset residents who felt that their home was going to be taken away from them, based on a social media post of a member of parliament who does not represent that region and does not know about that community. This happened in my local community yesterday. I had to talk very frankly with them. It was only because I had been the deputy mayor previously and understood this coastal community and the study that I could do that. If it had been someone who may not have had that history or that trust already with that community, it could have been a different outcome. Instead, we had 65 people sign up to the local progress association and the pub did well out of the drinks yesterday afternoon. I could alleviate that concern. It just demonstrated to me how people can read something on social media from somebody in a position of influence who did not represent that community and very quickly that is taken as gospel.

We have a responsibility in how we communicate with our communities as members of parliament. That is an example where social media can spread something very quickly and now I cannot get that message out equally as quickly because I do not have the same following he has. I do not have the same constituency or the large number of followers. I now have to use the resources of my office and staff to try to get that message out and undo that damage in the community and go and work with my local council to get that message out. It is quite interesting to see the impact of social media.

**Mr MICKEL:** Do not be defensive, but when I was elected most people said that the MPs were no good either. There was a job vacancy at Browns Plains to pack shelves at Woolworths; 400 people applied. There was a state election a couple of weeks later; four people applied and none of them lived in the electorate. I looked up yours: Stirling, four people applied for your job and, Amanda, seven applied for yours. That says to me that you are doing all right. What do you think of that? The other thing is this notion of the constituency MP. I think it is a lovely idea but it is nonsense, and I will tell you why. My question then is to Amanda. On your first day, when you walked into that office, how many people came in and said to you, 'I really do need you to help me, Amanda. That other bloke wouldn't listen to me'?

**Ms CAMM:** My parliamentary colleagues would know that I think this is a loaded question. The first day I walked into my office, there was not even a pencil or a piece of paper in the office. You do not realise that when you get elected as an MP. You walk in and no-one tells you how to do the job. There is a computer and you get a set of keys to an office and you make it up. You try to make it work. You reach out to your other parliamentary colleagues and steal their ideas of how they connect and what they are doing.



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I must say, if I am being honest, I had a lot of people come to me. I made a commitment when I first got elected that I would say yes to every invitation I could physically get to and I would meet with anybody who wanted a meeting with me. There are some people who during that meeting did express to me, 'I never got any help before,' and that is the truth. I am pleased to say that where I could I did, and if I could not I explained why I could not. I think that is something I have learned in the role as an elected representative—not to lead people on and set an expectation. If you cannot solve their problem or you cannot refer them or there is a reason—some people are looking for a frank and honest response that may give them closure. Sometimes I have had to say, 'You actually need some professional help. My office cannot provide that, but I can connect you with people who can.' I see the role of the MP with constituency as our job is to try to facilitate with ease the locals. If I am being honest, yes, I had a lot of people who came who had not been helped before—

**Mr MICKEL:** Who say they had not been helped.

**Ms CAMM:** Who said they had not been helped. There was evidence where they had not been helped—absolutely. They could bring me a folder of correspondence or there had never been contact made where it should have been made. We all have the freedom as MPs to invest our communication—when Pan talks about how we communicate with our constituency, nobody dictates to me how I communicate with my constituency, not even the party. As the local MP I choose how I want to communicate and engage. The member before me used to spend about \$60,000 a year on billboards. That is not how I spend the communication budget. We all have individual ways and styles.

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** I want to add to that by reflecting on one of the things that I think might be missing from Pan's four items of policy connection, service connections, symbolic connections or partisan connections—maybe this one fits into some of them—and that is the counselling service. I do not mean 'councillor' as in a member of the local council, but the counselling that we do as members of parliament with so many people who come through our door. We walk them through and talk them through things where the core issue is not necessarily an issue with government or government process or the bureaucracy; it is often an issue that is deeply personal to them and how their life is affected by something. It might have been a government related circumstance and you need to talk that through with them and do that sympathetically, supportively and kindly.

I was really struck about Amanda's point about the first time you come in the door. John, as you know, when I was first elected in 2006 I did so with a predecessor who was a member of the same party as me. In fact, it was someone I was very close to; I was their campaign director for the previous 15 years. When I went into Terry Sullivan's office, as it then became mine, one of the first things he said to me was, 'You'll have this particular person come and visit you and say that nothing had been done.' This is a sad story—and I will not go into the details—that related to an incident that happened to this woman when I was 18 months old, in 1972. Then in 2006 she was still raising this issue and was going through all the ways in which she had not been helped. To be honest, my assessment of the situation from looking at her file, talking to her and understanding the details was that she had been wronged but there was no process to resolve that at the time and the attenuation of time meant that it was never going to be resolved. I was trying to counsel her to let it go. She was too far gone. She had actually had her life ruined by the fact that she had become obsessive about this incident of wrongdoing to her a generation prior. That is why I often tell that story in those couched terms to constituents to say, 'Don't let this experience you have had do you wrong.'

I do want to use the opportunity to say this. We were talking before about the UK politicians and about the different experience of the way UK politicians interacted. I think in more recent times, as Pan said, they have found that they have to engage with their constituencies a lot more than they once did. In his book that came out last year called *Politics on the Edge*, Rory Stewart, who was a conservative MP in the UK, wrote about constituent meetings. The passage is long, but it is worth it. He wrote about the different types of people who would come to see him. He said—

Some seemed to come to my surgeries—  
as they are called in the UK—

almost as though they were visiting a witch: going through the motions of ritually invoking my power and calling on my aid, but with embarrassment—even perhaps shame—that they had made the visit: and with little hope that it would work.

In almost every case, I wrote to the government on my constituents' behalf.

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as we all do—

In most cases I found myself agreeing with them. And mysteriously in about half the cases I seemed to be able to help constituents win their complaints with the government. I could not quite explain why an MP with no legal powers should be able to overturn these things, or what should happen to those many constituents who had experienced similar things but didn't find their way to their MP.

There is a bit of a taste of: we do not know quite how this all works and we are trying to make it work for people but we do not know how it works either sometimes.

**Mr CAMPBELL:** I was formerly the member for Bundaberg. I was a member of the Labor Party and took over from a Labor member. When I retired, the member who was elected after me was a Labor member. That person became a minister. When that member retired, the party lost the seat. The next member who won it was an LNP member. That member became a minister. He lost the seat. With regard to competing interests—I am asking especially for country members—is there a real concern about not only representing your constituency but also, if you are a member of the cabinet, the competing interests of having both those roles?

**Ms CAMM:** I have not been a minister but, as a shadow minister, I understand completely about the competing roles and the expectations in the context of the tyranny of distance. Not only do I have to travel to the capital or across the state, but my electorate is three hours from one end to the other. Also, my electorate office is in another town, almost two hours away from where I live—and I live in the electorate. The tyranny of distance is real for regional MPs and that is different for city-based MPs.

I want to reflect on my great-uncle Ron Camm, who served in this parliament and was a minister of multiple portfolios. I still get told the stories when I attend community events. I have had people come and visit me in my office and many have given me this very sound advice from when I was first elected—and still do to this day. Even though he was a minister—and I can only imagine the tyranny of distance back then as they did not have the technology we do today. It amazes me the number of people who say, 'He still had time to turn up and drive around and call in on people and he was seen and would see anyone who came into his office who needed his help or his support.' Where it very much counted was in times of disaster, and when things were tough he was there. I have had many people explain to me that during cyclones and other challenges he was able to be there.

I note your example—and I have not done the research enough, but I would be intrigued now to have a look at other regional centres as to whether that has been the case that there is that trend or whether others have been able to juggle that. I think it is a reality. It is why I know—and Stirling touched on the complexity of our offices in terms of the calls and the inquiries they receive—how important and valuable is our team that supports us, because it is not just the MP; it is also the people who are there to do that work and take those inquiries when we are here.

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** I can reflect on the side of the minister's experience. I am actually spending more time now as a backbench member of parliament without a portfolio than I spent at any other time during my time in the parliament. I became what we now call an assistant minister 56 days after I was first elected. In all the time I have been in the parliament my party has been in government, and all of that time I have been in some sort of executive role—up until December last year.

It really comes down to a number of things. One, your time as a minister, less so as a regional minister, is restricted. You do not have the same capacity to physically be present and be available at activities and events in the community and be having in person those constituency meetings that I was just talking about. That comes back to, firstly, the point that Amanda finished on: your team becomes extraordinary. I have been blessed over a long period of having some amazingly good electorate officers. For most of my time as the member for Sandgate I had Avalon MacKellar as my electorate officer, who is famous across the state for her capacity and experience. She had been an electorate officer for Ken Hayward from 1989 and Wayne Swan in the federal parliament. She has done a lot of different things and I was very blessed to have really great support and capacity there.

It is also about building some of the service brand that you have that can help in that regard. Equally, I have to admit I was a little bit blessed by the fact that, particularly as the member for Sandgate over the past nine years, Sandgate is an electorate where people, other than my immediate predecessor, have expected members for Sandgate to be ministers, or at least the Leader of the Opposition, for a very long time. The expectation of the community was different and they understood the importance of those extra roles. You can never use it ultimately as an excuse, because unless you do put in the work to set up the systems to provide the support to people they will hold it against you, which you have seen firsthand.

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**Mr ELMES:** Pandanus has a comment to make as well.

**Dr PETTER:** That is a good question. Thank you for your service as a member of parliament as well. I will talk more comparatively about workload and competing priorities and the importance of staff, based on my research. As well as doing the interviews that went into this paper, I also sent a survey to every state and territory and federal just to ask comparatively: what do you prioritise in the electorate et cetera? I had an expectation that ministers, because of their workload, are not able to spend as much time in the constituency, and that is true, but at the same time, if they are in the capital, they will go to P&C meetings at night after they finish up at the ministry and they will fly back and forth on the weekend if they are further afield. It is part of the job that is considered so important that even a minister will not totally neglect it most of the time.

The other thing is staff, as you have both mentioned. MPs will think carefully about who they hire as staff and hire people who are either very experienced or very good at that service role. Some people would become a new member, hire some of their campaign staff and find that that was not the best fit for their skill set. So maybe do an open hire on Seek or something like that—find people who are good with people, find people who are locally connected. If you are in an electorate with a lot of diversity in terms of different towns that have different expectations or where you have a lot of linguistic diversity, you will hire members of staff who can speak those languages and service that extension for you connecting. It is something that people really expect.

I imagine different electorates have different expectations. For someone in a rural electorate it might be enough that they have a mobile office in that town every three months, whereas in a city you have to go around to all of your little community groups much more frequently. There are different expectations put on members of parliament. They all try their hardest to connect in this way.

**Dr MARTINEZ:** Something that seems to me paradoxical is that it is evident the amount of time and work that MPs put in. If you go through the surveys from my colleagues in the early 2000s, the amount of hours—if you go to the comparative evidence that you were mentioning in the UK and the US, it is nuts. They run. The first thing is they are put on the phones. They are asking for funding. It is basically tons of hours and tons of work, yet the view is that they are somewhere between a car sales man or woman and a real estate agent. There seems to be a paradox about the amount of work. It is objective. It goes across parties, regardless of where you stand. It is obvious.

Here comes my question, linking it to the 'Future of the Constituency MP' and to a recent event that made national headlines. What do you think about sharing the load—getting two MPs for one seat? In principle, I disagree for some reasons but, given the amount of work and given the challenges of social media and misinformation—the question is for the three of you.

**Mr ELMES:** We will ask Stirling and Amanda. We are getting close to time, so if we can keep it to about two minutes.

**Mr HINCHLIFFE:** I have to say at the outset that I should be acknowledging that, after all my throwing shade at real estate agents, the member for Bancroft, who is here, was formerly a real estate agent. It is good to show that he has stepped up in the world in becoming a member of parliament!

I have looked at that as an issue. I do recall having to hide the 2011 Census form from my wife when I filled out how many hours I had worked in that week. I literally hid it from her because I was a minister at the time and it was three figures. There is part of the solution. I think the reality is that—and this is different for different members—you want to have different people with different life experiences and different sets of stories. In my instance, the reason I have been able to sustain that sort of activity over this length of time has actually been, in a funny way, that my constituencies have got two for one. I go to my original point about what it was like before 1973, because my wife, Megan, has carried us. She has stayed out of the paid workforce the whole time I have been a member of parliament to support our family and make our family work better and to support me. That has been a very effective way in which we have made it work for that length of time.

That is not going to be everyone's experience, and I do not think it should be, but that is part of where there has been a bit of two for one. There have been lots of instances where my wife has attended the P&C meeting or the community event. It is a bit old-fashioned. It is probably not very PC. I am probably getting in trouble for even thinking about the concept, but that is the way it has worked for us. There is a bit of the two for one there but there was only one salary being paid.

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**Ms CAMM:** I commend that. I think any MP for whom that can work is to be commended, because everyone has to be in. You have to understand the challenge with the role. Let's not talk about the divorce rate of members of parliament. Seriously, it is up near 70 per cent now. We need a paper on that, Pan! I don't know if that is your forte.

It can be challenging. I am a single mother of adult children. My youngest is going into year 12 next year. Add the tyranny of distance, constituency and family, and something gives on different accounts. As the woman, as the mother, it does not come without sacrifice. I do not ask for sympathy for that. That is a decision that I have made, and I have made that decision with my children, who are very supportive actually. They share the load too. They are very good at washing, cooking, ironing and all those sorts of things. I have made the best boys. There are two women who are going to be very happy in life one day!

I do not prescribe—I do not even know how that could ever work—two MPs. Even at the federal level there is a discussion about job-sharing. That is what you are talking about. It has been toyed with. I have done job-share. It is hard. Job-sharing is hard just by nature of communication, stakeholders and everyone knowing how you pick up and leave off. To be able to do it in what is a very dynamic role and fast moving, even locally the issues that you have to be across to be able to share with your office and to try to share that with someone else who really may not have the exact same perspective that you do and then how that works in this place—I cannot even get my head around how that would work, actually. I would not be a fan of that.

To add to that very briefly, people come into this role knowing that you might be here for a short time or you might be here for a longer time so you are going to make the most of it. You do not really know what the timing is. Sometimes that timing is out of your control. I have never met an MP who does not make the most of it. We might do it in different ways, but they get in and make the most of the time that they are here to serve.

**Mr ELMES:** We might leave it there. You can talk to Amanda and Stirling when we finish but we are at the prescribed time. I wanted to leave a minute or so for Pan to say a couple of words just to wrap up some of the things that he has picked up through the discussion tonight.

**Dr PETTER:** Thanks, Glen, Amanda and Stirling. There has been a lot of talk of workload. There has been a lot of talk of people's perceptions of politics, misinformation and social media. Do we need a different system? All I would say about that, Ferran, is that in every system, even multimember districts, the MP still works lots of hours. They just find more and more work. What I found as well with what MPs have told me through surveys and things is that it is about all the new communication technologies. You would expect with all of this new technology that it is a case of 'I'll find all the problems much more efficiently now and then solve them', but no. The workload increases with your capacity to communicate with people. Especially with things like COVID, people's workloads went through the roof. At the same time, they find it very difficult to do work in the same way.

I would reflect on the theme here of the 'Future of the Constituency MP' and think about what is changing in the system. We have seen the job grow and grow—grow in complexity and grow in the time it takes. I just wonder how much more it can grow, or will it keep growing? Do we need job-sharing et cetera or would that actually just keep the job bigger for more people and cost the public more, which they are not necessarily inclined to do?

There is another point, which is that there is a lot of talk in the media recently—after Donald Trump's close call but in the UK as well, where they have had some tragedies with MPs who have been killed while they have been doing constituency work—about whether MPs are secure enough. Do they need to be secure in their work, or would that actually have the opposite effect of making them feel less secure, not be actually any more secure and increase that sense of disconnection with the public? That is what I would reflect upon.

Our MPs do a lot of work. They try their best. Representation is inherently an interpretive and flawed thing and they work hard at it. Are they safe when they are doing it? Are there ways we can do the work differently?

**Mr ELMES:** Thanks, Pan. I think that was a great discussion. I think everyone will agree. We are going to continue with drinks out on the colonnade shortly. I will now hand over to David Fraser.

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**Mr FRASER:** I think it has been a very interesting discussion. I would like us to all thank our three speakers—Pan, Amanda and Stirling—for their contribution tonight. I would say in concluding that if you want a solution to the question of hardworking parliamentarians or overworked parliamentarians you could always go back to the first 50 years of Queensland when we had multimember constituencies and also to Britain where, to the best of my recollection, they had multimember constituencies up until around the time of the Second World War. There is nothing new in this world and there is always a solution under a rock somewhere.

We should also thank Glen for his sterling efforts! As Glen indicated, we are serving refreshments outside on the colonnade. You are all welcome to join us. I should say in conclusion that, if you are impressed with the work that Pan has done, we still have the competition open for which he received a prize. If you know any students at any of the universities who may be keen to participate, there are details on our website. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. You are welcome to stay and join us for refreshments.