
Is There Life After Parliament? Reflections of a Former Senator*

Margaret Reynolds

When I was asked to give this lecture I realised it would be almost ... to the day ... just ten years since I left the Senate in June 1999.

During those years many changes have occurred in Australian politics ... new governments and policies, new ideas and technology. However for all that has changed it is remarkable how many debates remain the same. As I read news reports I often have a sense of déjà vu ... Didn't I contribute to this call for policy reform one, two or more decades ago?

Recently I addressed a group of young women unionists actively campaigning for universal access to paid maternity leave. In preparing my speech I sighed and recalled the detail of so many campaigns that women of my generation had run for the last 40 years. I wondered why we had been so patient, so tolerant of those various economic arguments that insisted that Australia could not afford policies that have long been in place in other OECD countries. At last it seems our voices have been heard!

One of the questions facing those of us who have been involved in public policy debate over several decades is how can we pass on that historic knowledge of past practice? It is very depressing to watch another generation ... simply reinvent the wheel ... and make the same mistakes that resulted in policy change a decade ago! On one hand it is essential to leave younger people to bring forward fresh ideas for new circumstances, but it is also important to incorporate the lessons learned from the past.

In the 1960s when working with a welfare organisation I was given food vouchers to help Aboriginal families eat better quality food. At the time I was highly embarrassed to accompany women and small children to the shop where a censorious shopkeeper dictated which food could be purchased. In those years I often bought a packet of sweet biscuits, ice cream or lollies that were denied under the voucher scheme. Forty years on I am appalled that modern policy-makers have re-introduced this updated version of paternalism to quarantine part of the pension to be spent appropriately. I wonder how this policy requirement would work here in the national capital if a proportion of public sector salaries were quarantined to protect people from making unhealthy decisions. Or is it only the poor who need guidance?

This lecture gives me the chance to reflect on the direction I have taken in the last ten years and also to comment on the role former parliamentarians have in Australian communities and beyond.

When I left the Senate I had some clear plans about how I was going to move back into private life. I had a part-time position at the University of Queensland and was continuing some of my international work with both the Commonwealth and the United Nations. I was also packing up after 30 years in the tropics to move back to Tasmania.

I was unprepared for the shock of realising just how divorced many Australians are from their democracy. I had forgotten what it was like to be on the outside looking in to the political world of decision-making. I began to realise just how much information I had personally absorbed about government and its influence on the community. Yet I was dismayed to learn how little people understood about their democracy.

As a nation we pride ourselves on our long standing system of governance yet we are less committed to communicating just how this system functions and how citizens can actively participate in this process.

I found that after years of closely monitoring and debating public policy I now lived in a world where it was almost irrelevant! Many people are either not interested in or distrusting of the political process while others have totally unrealistic expectations of how quickly reform could be achieved. It seems many Australians are either dismissive of the political process or totally mystified about how the system actually works and how they can contribute to debate.

As a former teacher I have always been interested in the link between education and active citizenship. While in Parliament I used to visit schools to introduce children of all ages to the basics of democracy. Instead of lecturing on the facts and figures, I learned to transform the classroom into 'Question Time' complete with volunteer ministers and opposition members. This method was popular because the children chose local topics and identified issues of direct relevance to them ... the environment, road safety, health, food, sport and music were always on the agenda.

In my post-parliamentary life I worked in East Timor, Fiji and Africa where I extended this model to give women an understanding of decision-making at local, national and international level. In Dili I worked on a pre-election education campaign as women prepared for their first experience of the democratic process whether as voters, workers or candidates. We role-played a range of situations including how women candidates might respond to pressures from family, church and male colleagues.

In Africa I worked with women from around the Commonwealth as we planned to feminise the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and in Fiji women from around the South Pacific developed their own system of government complete with a Women's Cabinet in which I played the role of the token male! Back in Australia I

focussed on young people in schools and university encouraging them to get involved and be less cynical about the political process.

In 1999 I organised in the Queensland Parliament a Youth Reconciliation Parliament where 50 teenagers were selected from around the state on the basis of their submitted speeches to participate in this memorable event. Listening to their insights into Australian race relations I could not but wish that their views were echoed in the corridors of power in Canberra at the time. Their knowledge, wisdom and passion put many of us to shame as they reached out for real solutions to historic failure.

As preparations were underway to mark the Centenary of Federation in 2001, I wondered how relevant many Australians would see this democratic landmark. How could local communities be engaged in such a remote event?

My answer came in the form of 26 youth parliaments to be held in each Tasmanian local government area. At the time only a few councils seriously engaged with young people and I wanted to bring young people into a project that combined understanding of the democratic process with the reality of life in local communities. I talked with councils about each sponsoring a May Youth Parliament in their chambers to coincide with the celebrations in Melbourne.

It was not an easy task and timing changed in different areas of the state. However I was greatly assisted by the Tasmanian Speaker of the Legislative Assembly who agreed to invite representatives of each Youth Parliament to a special session of the Tasmanian Parliament later that year. This encouraged all councils to get involved so by October each council had two youth representatives who travelled to Hobart for the grand occasion when four teenagers, elected by their peers from each geographic region of the state, addressed the Tasmanian Parliament.

Standing orders had been suspended only once before on the occasion of a formal parliamentary apology when Aboriginal elders had addressed the Parliament. Government and Opposition members listened for an hour as student speakers outlined their concerns for the future. In a follow up ceremony 52 representatives from around the state presented then Premier Jim Bacon with their submissions and each received a formal response detailing government policy. This model is probably unique and its impact translated into many more Tasmanians being aware and interested in the Centenary of Federation because it involved their young people talking about local issues and being proactive in presenting them to the government.

Once I became focussed on this linkage between the democratic process and active citizenship, I could see so many opportunities to engage my students and local communities in better understanding of their place in local democracy.

In my human rights classes we role-played United Nations forums and tribunals and to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held a model CHOGM which was an open forum attended by a number of senior school students. Tertiary students planned the event and adopted a country to represent. Some dressed up for the occasion, which included a colourful parade and opening ceremony.

During this period I was President of the United Nations Association of Australia at a time when Australia's reputation was under close scrutiny for its arbitrary detention policies. I encouraged many refugee advocates to put forward the traumatic experience of detainees and under the UNAA banner three reports were presented to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva over the period 2002–2004.

I well remember the reaction of delegates from many nations who did not understand why a country like Australia could not manage to accommodate comparatively small numbers of asylum seekers without resorting to punitive policies in isolated desert camps. One year a group of students accompanied me to Geneva where they spoke to delegates and learned first-hand just how damaging the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers was to Australia's international reputation as a responsible global citizen.

In 2004 I accepted a position in Tasmania with National Disability Services, Australia's peak organisation representing disability service providers. My role was to work with non-government disability service providers and the state government to ensure that people with disabilities were able to exercise their rights as citizens.

I worked in a small office with limited resources and high expectations of what needed to change in getting a fair go for Tasmanians with disabilities. Having grown up in Tasmania, a very small and friendly state, I knew many people now in influential positions. As a youngster I had played beach cricket with the Governor, had a teenage date with a prominent member of the Liberal Opposition, and I knew most members of the Labor Government by their first names.

I was not sure this local knowledge would necessarily assist me but it was certainly a good start in finding my way around a system very much in need of reform. The situation at state level suggested that many reforms associated with federal government initiatives in the 1980s and 90s had started to be taken for granted without the specific injection of resources or updating of policy locally.

While Tasmania was the first state to close its mental institution and offer intellectually disabled people the opportunity to live in the community, there had been limited thought given to the impact this would have on available revenue. Dollars saved in closing the institution went back into consolidated revenue and could not be traced for use in new service provision. Waiting lists continued to grow and service providers were under considerable pressure to respond in situations of continual crisis management. In the last twelve months Tasmania has moved towards a new model of reform and integrated disability access planning across all government departments.

Many of the strategies I have used to assist bring about these changes have been adapted from my experience in the Senate. I focussed on budgetary decisions including attending the annual Budget lock up, attending Estimates and preparing Disability Impact Statements on the State Budget. One year we even challenged funding processes by appealing to the Auditor-General, a decision which was not well received but was essential in trying to track just how the disability dollar was spent to increase the availability of services for people so in need. At the same time I was working to build a tri-partisan network of support in the Parliament to put disability rights firmly on the political agenda.

Many Australians assume that their former elected representatives fade into their communities and have no specific responsibility once they leave public life. But is this true? Should we exile those who have so contributed to a period of public policy debate as no longer having an ongoing role to contribute aspects of their knowledge and experience?

Former prime ministers continue to have access to an office, staff and travel and it is assumed they will continue to contribute to public debate based on their experience as leaders. Some state premiers and former ministers take on paid or voluntary positions which enable them to focus on specific areas of public policy. Some former parliamentarians use their contacts and knowledge of the political process to become lobbyists while others look for positions of influence on public and private sector boards of management. Increasingly, a number of former parliamentarians are offered positions in academia. Some move to the international arena and some take on new challenges that bear no resemblance to their former careers in public policy. A few write their memoirs or contribute to public debate through lecturing and writing.

Should the Australian community have any specific expectations of their former elected representatives? Is it reasonable to expect that the public investment in the democratic process may extend beyond those years when individuals are paid to actually represent the Australian people?

These days parliamentary life may only occupy a small proportion of working life. The average age of sitting parliamentarians is much lower than in the days when mainly men were elected in middle age and retired late in life. Today's parliamentarians are younger and may have two or three careers ahead of them when they depart the political stage. Parliamentary superannuation even under the new guidelines is generous.

Those who are defeated in election are often disadvantaged in the workplace because they are seen as no longer having the influence they once enjoyed. This is especially true if there is a change of government. Australian parliamentarians are by definition 'party animals' so their partisan loyalties may not necessarily assist in finding a new career. Those who retire from Parliament by choice may already have lined up new careers taking advantage of in-house contacts and opportunities. Others may specifically choose positions in the corporate sector where their political insights may be of particular value. Should there be any limits to taking the knowledge and benefits of parliamentary experience into the market place to be sold off to the highest bidder?

It is a standard refrain of many parliamentarians that they have 'retired to spend more time with their families.' But I have never heard anyone declare they intend to spend more time with their community! Yet elected representatives have learnt so much about their community and have spent a great deal of time working to enhance community life. How can this experience be utilised when an individual returns to life as a private citizen?

When I was leaving the Senate in 1999 I did wonder how I would adjust to a very different lifestyle. I had been in public life for 20 years and expected to actively participate in a range of current social debates. I was used to being asked my opinion and commenting in the media. I expected to be invited to numerous official functions

as I had become an expert at cutting ribbons and unveiling plaques! I had detailed itineraries planned months in advance and was used to travelling across the continent and overseas. I could make impromptu speeches on almost any topic and kept an anecdote book to lighten some of the prepared speeches that I had to deliver! How would I respond to a quieter life in regional Tasmania? Would I suffer from the condition Gareth Evans described when the Government became Opposition in 1996 ... that is, the Relevance Deprivation Syndrome?

My first challenge in leaving the Senate was to keep in check my partisan view of political issues. After spending all those years asserting the philosophy and policies of the Australian Labor Party I found myself lecturing students at the University of Queensland where I knew I had a responsibility to present a balanced perspective and encourage open debate. I was teaching human rights and international politics so thought I would not necessarily stray into Australian politics. However I soon found myself praising the Howard Government's initiatives in East Timor and explaining my own party's failure over 20 years to protect the East Timorese.

Working in a university after life in Parliament highlighted the gulf that exists between these two institutions. When as a parliamentarian I was involved in public policy development there was limited referral to those whose focussed research may have enhanced practical policy implementation. Yet within academia itself I found there was equal lack of interest or misunderstanding about the challenges that parliamentarians face in finding solutions to complex issues. Too many academics appear to be so narrowly focussed on specific area of research that they are unable to contribute to public debate, but equally too many parliamentarian adopt such a generic view of the world that they fail to draw on the expertise available in our tertiary institutions. There should be a more proactive way to encourage a more realistic exchange that would be a great benefit to the community.

In each of my post-parliamentary roles I have been very aware and appreciative of the lessons I learned as a senator and a minister. I have seen first-hand how government and the Parliament function. I know the systems and processes and how to work at local, state, national and international levels. I understand the intricacies of lobbying effectively and how to use the media to get issues onto the political agenda. Anyone elected to the Parliament acquires this knowledge but it is not until we leave that we realise just how valuable it is. And certainly senators are particularly advantaged in having sat through many hours of Senate Estimates Hearings when we learn so much about government and the interdepartmental processes (or lack of them). I also found the Senate Estimates processes especially educational in understanding the tensions between political and bureaucratic priorities.

My experience working in various communities has convinced me that we cannot boast about our status as an effective democracy until we succeed in engaging more citizens in its processes. This is especially important for young people and less advantaged citizens. All parliamentarians are concerned to create better understanding of our democratic institutions. Perhaps some may choose to take on that additional challenge when they leave the Parliament well equipped to enhance the level of understanding of Australia's democracy.



Question — What do you think of the idea of some sort of formal arrangement, as was suggested at the 2020 Summit, for drawing on not only retired politicians but people retired from other areas to act as mentors and so on in their particular areas?

Margaret Reynolds — I think it's a great idea and I remember reading about it after the 2020 Summit. I think that there is that tendency for each generation to try to bring about change and sometimes we succeed and sometimes we don't, and if we don't share the experience it just makes it harder for the next generation. So I certainly think that suggestion that came through at the 2020 Summit should be followed up on.

Question — You're talking about democracy and I think it's a bit like the tail wagging the dog. This occasion right now, on the news, where the senator took her baby into the Senate. She is pushing the envelope really, isn't she? It's not good to throw away all the old rules. I know the younger ones are pushing the envelope but they are trying to throw away everything. I really feel that she is doing more harm than good for females. She could have given the baby to someone else or not even have gone in. It annoyed me because I don't think that she is doing us any favours. It is the opposite actually. We can take some of these things that the younger people have given us and I have endorsed them myself, I have even learnt the computer and everything like that so I'm up with the modern times. But you have to keep some of the old.

Margaret Reynolds — Look, I think the particular experience in the Senate last night was divisive; some people have your view, others say well, why shouldn't she? The reality for those of us who know directly how the Senate works is that we know that there are standing orders and there are certain things you can do and there are certain things you can't do, and strangers can't be on the floor of the Senate because they haven't been elected. I think you need to have a little bit of flexibility if there is an emergency. Apparently there is now child care in Parliament House, that's wonderful, but you do need a little bit of flexibility if there is an emergency. I guess there wouldn't be too many parents who haven't had an emergency where they say: 'What will we do with the children?'

Question — Margaret, democracy only functions properly if the community is politically aware. I don't think the average Australian is particularly interested or aware of what goes on. What can we do about this?

Margaret Reynolds — My answer would be to ensure that real political education is in the curriculum of every school. It is in some areas, and it is done extremely well, but it is very much a hit and miss affair. I remember one of these youth parliaments that I ran in a particular school. You walk in, you don't know the children, you depend on the children to respond to you, and this little boy volunteered to be the President. I think we were doing a Senate that day, and he volunteered to be the President and with my help conduct question time. A teacher came up and put her hand on his shoulder and said: 'Oh Jimmy, you couldn't possibly do that.' I was absolutely floored. I didn't know what to do because the kid was crest-fallen and he

had volunteered, and was I supposed to go against the teacher? So I said, 'Oh I'm sure we will manage together' and he became the President. He was great. He just needed that opportunity to show that he could make a contribution, but perhaps he was very bad at his arithmetic or whatever he was doing at school. We tend in too many classes to try to control and manage how children will respond.

I know there is a great concern about partisanship. This is one of the reasons I developed this model, because I used to think, how I can do it so that it's not about Labor, Liberal, National Party and Greens? That's why I developed this idea of a question time based on children's issues and understandings. I think we should do much more of that when they are very young and then gradually change it, obviously, so that they understand the various processes as they go through high school and into university. I can say that I basically agree with you, that it was only when I went back into a lot more community activity that I thought, people don't understand what they have got, the value of our democracy and especially the cynicism really upsets me because it's also unfair. In politics you have debates and your arguments with people and there are some people you are more likely to agree with than others but once you get outside you do appreciate just how much work and how much commitment everyone who is elected is prepared to give.

Question — It has been commented by people in the Parliamentary Education Office that teachers are intimidated by the systems. It could be an example of that.

Margaret Reynolds — Teachers are very worried that they will be accused of being partisan and I know I got more invitations than perhaps I should have because teachers thought: 'Oh thank goodness, someone else can do this', and yet they were asking a Labor senator. The fact that I was a Labor senator was irrelevant because of the way we did it. I don't think party politics was mentioned.

Question — I would like to commend Margaret on her active life after politics. I think it's a terrific example. We do invest a lot of time and public money into members of Parliament; I think it's very creditable to you that you have gone on particularly with the democracy education and people's rights. You mentioned a fair go for people with disabilities. I think people knowing their rights is incredibly important, and so is having education that is relevant to young people and being able to work with people with disabilities and giving them a fair go. I would just like to express my admiration. I think you are doing a terrific job.

Margaret Reynolds — Thank you very much.

Question — I would just like to ask if you could reflect a bit more on how we include Australian citizens who are indigenous in our political conversations. There has been a lot of discussion about this around the intervention.

Margaret Reynolds — It's a very good question, and I have a very good example of how involved indigenous communities can be in something that directly affects them.

We get involved in the first place because, before we go into Parliament and represent other people, speak up for other people, we are engaged because we suddenly think of

something that affects us or our families or someone close to us. We think: 'That's not fair', and we have got to do something about it; that is really what drives most people.

Now in terms of indigenous communities, a number of years ago there was an issue affecting indigenous communities, it related to native title legislation and at the time I was involved at the United Nations as a parliamentary representative with former Senator Kay Patterson. I went to visit a number of Aboriginal communities in North Queensland and the Northern Territory. I'd been at the United Nations where I was actually doing a bit of work on the Convention relating to indigenous people, the UN Convention. I thought to myself: 'How am I going to talk about this, the United Nations, something that affects people in these very isolated communities?' I got there, and one of the first questions from one of the community was, had I been talking about that 'paper about convention for indigenous people'. The language was not directly correct, whatever that means, but the awareness was there, because it was being debated in local communities.

I think we underestimate many remote communities, be they indigenous, be they remote in terms of geographic or educational levels. If people are concerned about issues that directly impact on them we should be able to involve them in the debate instead of making decisions for them. I don't think we are doing nearly enough in terms of 10 years on, 20 years on, in involving indigenous people in political debate. It's not that they are not interested; we are not listening.