



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

**ELECTORATE FIRST? THE ROLE OF
INDEPENDENTS IN THE ASSEMBLY**

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2011

Brisbane

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Ms MALONE: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to welcome you here this evening to the Queensland chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group's forum on 'Electorate first? The Role of Independents in the Assembly.' I extend a welcome to everybody present, and particularly to our speakers, Liz Cunningham and Rob Messenger.

For those who have not been here before, let me introduce myself. I am Nonie Malone and I am the chair of the Queensland chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group—the relatively newly elected chair of the chapter. For those who are new to the organisation, I will just tell you a little about the organisation. The Australasian Study of Parliament Group has a charter to bring together parliamentarians, academics, members of the media, parliamentary staff and other interested persons to foster debate, research and understanding of our Westminster parliamentary system.

This is the second event for the Queensland chapter in 2011. The earlier event in April, which I believe was very well attended and very hotly contested, was on the new parliamentary committee system. This evening's topic, 'Electorate First? The Role of Independents in the Assembly', is a topic of heightened current interest since last year's Commonwealth election, which put the spotlight on Independents who would hold the balance of power. For the Commonwealth, this was the first hung parliament in 40 years but for Queensland it was not just a distant or seemingly impossible event.

Hung parliaments—or at least minority governments—tend to not last for long. There have been two in Queensland's recent history. The Borbidge Liberal National Party minority government, which was formed in 1995 with the support of Liz Cunningham, lasted for one electoral term—from 1995 to 1998—and then the Beattie Labor minority government, with the support of Peter Wellington, lasted for only six months before a by-election brought majority government. So the Queensland experience shows that, while minority governments may be short-lived, the existence and persistence of Independents in the parliament is not short-lived. Since 1998—for the last 13 years—we have had four to six Independents continuously serving in this parliament. Of the current Independents, Liz Cunningham has been serving in the Queensland parliament for the longest—for six parliaments and just over 16 years. Perhaps one of the current six will match the record of Tom Aikens, who served for 33 years—12 consecutive terms—for the seat of Townsville from 1944 to 1977.

There is no one-size-fits-all model of a modern Independent member of parliament. Some are born—so they are always independent—and others revoke party allegiance to become independent. We have representation of both of those tonight. Without doubt there will be many commonalities among Independents that differentiate them from those serving through the institutions and forms of political parties. There are also likely to be many differences that characterise each Independent and make it impossible to pigeonhole Independents as a political class of parliamentarians. So tonight we hope to shed light on what it is to be an Independent—what the motivations are, what the constraints are, what the commonalities with all other parliamentarians and with each other are and what differences there are.

I would now like to commence the proceedings by introducing Liz Cunningham, the member for Gladstone, the longest-serving current Independent. Liz Cunningham was elected in mid-1995. She was the first non-Labor member for Gladstone in more than 60 years. Prior to that election she had served Calliope shire council as a councillor and a mayor for a total of seven years. She is a hardworking MP and she has retained the confidence of her electorate through those six elections. Known for her unwavering advocacy for the basics in Gladstone—for schools and for hospitals—and for her passionate defence of strongly held social views, Liz has been a willing supporter of the ASPG throughout her time in this parliament. So ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Liz Cunningham.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: Thank you very much. Thank you madam chair. Mr Speaker, I saw you sneak in the back door. It is good to see the member for Burnett, the member for Keppel and the member for Gympie. I thank you for the opportunity to come. I am not going to give an academic treatise on Independents, because that is not the approach that I have to my role in the parliament anyway. The topic 'Electorate First? The role of Independents in the Assembly' was one that I think left the opportunity to speak very broadly. I say to people in my electorate—students in particular when I go to speak to them—that I see the role of Independent as threefold. Actually, it is fourfold. The first one I think as an Independent and indeed as a member of any parliament, whether you are in a party or not, is that you need to be responsible and supportive of your own value set. If you cannot defend your own value, you cannot defend the values of other people. So I believe that the first responsibility as an Independent is to have your own core values and to live and work within those core values.

Your second responsibility, I believe, is to your electorate—the people who have elected you to represent them. There will be those in your electorate with whom you do not share a commonality of view on many things but, overwhelmingly, once the election dust has settled your responsibility is to represent your whole electorate. When I first got elected, I was a little bit surprised—and to this day I do not know whether it was a throwaway comment—when someone said to me that there was a person in the parliament who represented only the concerns of members of his party. Anyone else, their letters ended up Brisbane

in the bin. I thought firstly, 'He must be an incredibly astute person to know the politics of everybody in his electorate' and, secondly, 'I would not like to be that person going shopping one night to have somebody come up and say, "What are you going to do about that letter that I sent to you?"' If it is one that has been binned, it is not an explanation that I would like to give. So listening to your community, or representing your community, has a number of factors involved. Many of these are common to party-political representatives as well, I believe. But there are some specific issues that set Independents apart.

The first—and this is I believe some of the common values—is it is important as a representative to listen to the people in your community. But bear in mind that there are usually two sides to an issue, particularly controversial issues. I know that when there is a controversial or an emotive issue that comes before parliament many of us receive a series of letters. They will often be the same letter or a similar letter demanding that, as a representative, you reflect your community's desire and vote against an issue. Then you will get on the same issue letters from the other part of the community saying that, as their representative, they demand that you represent their wish for you to vote the opposite way. So the idea that you must always represent the community view is not as cut and dried as it sounds. In those sorts of circumstances I know—and I am sure other members of parliament do the same thing—you have to work out, in the best set of circumstances, taking into account all of the matters at hand, what is best for your community. This is where Independents, I think, have an edge on the party members in the place—their toes will be curling already. The Independents have an edge in that you are free then to take that position on an issue that you believe is best and beneficial for your electorate.

The second thing that I think is important as an elected representative is to be a conduit for information back to your community—that it is not just a one-way street, that you bring your constituent concerns down to parliament. That is a big responsibility and I believe a very important one. But it is also important to take the information back to your community. Then, of course, there is the work on individual issues in the electorate. I think that is probably where the greatest commonality occurs between Independents and party members. I do not know about the other members of parliament here, but it is probably where we get our greatest satisfaction. I say that as an Independent and I am not putting words in anyone's mouth. But the ability to help somebody get some clarity on an issue, to get some progress on an issue with the bureaucracy or within a department, or get someone's teeth fixed at the oral health centre or someone's prosthetic leg made so that they can actually get up and walk—those personal issues are very gratifying, I believe, for members of parliament. Amongst all of the rubbish that goes on, it is that stuff that makes the job worthwhile. I am speaking for myself. It certainly is for me—that amongst all of the combative behaviour that occurs down here you go back to your electorates and you can work to improve somebody's quality of life or the circumstances in which they have to function and that is what makes you stand for the next election.

The third responsibility I believe is to the broader community, because as an elected representative my primary focus is my electorate. But the fact is that the vast majority of bills that go through this chamber have a broad impact on the whole of Queensland. I know you mentioned the time when the parliament here was hung. When Rob Borbidge was the Premier, there was a lot of information coming in from across the state on every issue that you could imagine asking for my assistance to present concerns, or present the facts, or present the issue to the parliament or to the minister. Whether we like it or not, our primary responsibility is to represent our community, but many times when we vote in there we are voting on issues that affect the entire state. So we do have a responsibility to the broader community and that is party members as well as Independents.

I believe, however, that Independents do not have to compromise any of those tripartite values—whether it is your own value set, your responsibility to the people who have elected you or your responsibility to the community at large. Rob is going to speak after me and he has been in both situations. I have never been in a party. I think, honestly, I would last about a week and then they would give me the boot. I do not think that I would last very long—maybe a month, but that is not likely. The thing that I believe is the strength of being an independent is the ability to be true to those three strings to the instrument of being a representative.

It appears to me—and this is an observation on my part looking from the outside into a party, looking at the voting in the chamber at various times and seeing at times individuals whose personal value sets have to be compromised—that a party person has their party allegiances first and they have branch allegiances as well and they then have their community allegiances. I have heard the argument that a party member prosecutes the views of their electorate in their caucus meeting and then they vote according to whatever the decision of the caucus meeting within the chamber. The fact is that, as an Independent, we do not have that constraint.

I will give you a current example—and we were given a time limit everyone so you can relax. We have been told how long we can talk for. Currently in my electorate there is an issue to do with the harbour. Right up and down the state of Queensland at Christmas time last year there were enormous floods not only on the coast but also inland and we saw a lot of tragedies. Gladstone Harbour was not the only one that suffered in those torrential rains. However, it is the only harbour that has faced the sort of problems that we are facing in relation to fish illnesses and what appears to be harbour toxicity. In terms of turtles and dugongs, their deaths have been registered up and down the coast wherever there has been huge outflows of fresh water. But in Gladstone, there is the toxicity.

The community that I represent has been calling for more information. They have been calling for independent information. They have been calling for transparency in the data so that all of the information that has been released does not come from a single source with a single agenda. That is what I have been asking for in the media and in the parliament and in the meetings that I have had. Only last weekend I was accused in the paper of calling employees of a particular agency in my electorate criminals. The writer of the letter had said that I was claiming that everybody who worked in this particular agency was a criminal because I was calling into question the clarity or the transparency of the data that was being used to prove that an activity was not a major contributor to the problems. I had one constituent ring me up and say, 'Liz, that's a pretty nasty letter. I thought you were just doing your job.' That is the sort of reinforcement that I value and it is that job that I believe an Independent can do without any constraint. I do not have any allegiance to the current Labor government and I certainly do not have an allegiance to the current LNP opposition. As an Independent my freedoms allow me to be true to my own personal value set, to my community and then to the broader community. I value that beyond measure in my job here in this parliament.

I am going to close with this because we are having questions after and that is probably more interesting for you. James Bovard said—

Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.

I think the Independents are the equalising force in the wolves and the sheep debate. The others have a vested interest. The Independents want to see that democracy works and that it works to reflect what the community desires.

You covered in your introduction a number of issues in relation to Independents in the parliament. The usual questions about Independents are, 'Can a parliament operate with Independents?' I believe unreservedly it can. Historically it has. There are many local councils that are made up of Independent members. They operate extremely well. The Independents deal on the basis of issues rather than on affiliations. 'Some say in the chamber that Independents are a waste of space.' That is putting politely what is said. What is said is probably a bit more colourful than that. I do not believe so. I believe the Independents have been able to represent their communities. They have been able to speak up on issues without constraint. They have been able to represent the points of view of people who have elected them without fear or favour. So I believe that a parliament is stronger because of its Independent representatives rather than weaker. Many in the community do not understand or do not remember that the original parliaments here in Queensland were made up of Independents. They have believed the chatter that says that governments cannot operate without parties. I do not subscribe to that view and I would love an opportunity in a future government to be able to prove that a parliament of Queensland made up of Independents could operate democratically, fairly and effectively. Thank you.

Ms MALONE: We will progress to the next speaker and then there will be ample time for questions of each of the speakers after that. While Liz was one of those born Independents, Rob is one who had independence thrust upon him. He was elected as the National Party member for Burnett in 2004 following a career spanning service in the RAAF, television and radio.

As soon as Rob landed in the parliament he seemed to be catapulted into shadow ministerial portfolios. There is just no gap, is there? He arrived and went into the shadow ministry. He served as shadow minister for a range of portfolios: tourism and small business, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander partnerships, police and corrective services, environment and heritage and education and the arts. Rob became an Independent member of the parliament in mid-2010—paraphrasing his own words—to be a more effective representative of the people of Burnett and to get more for his community. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Rob.

Mr MESSENGER: Thank you, Madam Chair. Ladies and gentlemen, I would first like to acknowledge and pay my deepest respects to the first Independents in the country and that, of course, is the Indigenous people, the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we stand, meet and talk. I would also like to acknowledge my fellow parliamentarians, the member for Keppel, the member for Gympie, the member for Brisbane Central and also the Independent member for Gladstone.

Lovers of parliamentary democracy, it is an honour to be speaking here in this chamber. As most of you will already know, I have not always been an Independent member of parliament. I came to this place as a member of a political party in February 2004 and made the transition to Independent in May 2010. Why did I become an Independent? That would probably be a good title for a book. There are a significant number of important issues that for me were not being addressed within the party structure at that time. I will list four: asset sales; local health funding and resourcing; Queensland country areas not receiving a fair share of the wealth; and the reform of the Queensland political process. Importantly, I had lost hope that those issues would be properly addressed and solutions found by the political party I was part of so I made the decision to, as the theme of the gathering of this evening suggests, put my electorate first.

By becoming an Independent I made a statement that my loyalty and my love is with my family and community and not a political party. Because of another health crisis which had been brought to my attention by my constituents and other medical professionals, I needed to have the freedom to raise what I considered to be life and death matters in the parliament and I believed I was not given that freedom to raise that issue as a member of a political party. I am glad to say that that issue has now been successfully resolved.

I believed that I was being censored by political leadership. Therefore, I became an independent. I spent considerable time thinking about how I would focus my energies and time in this place. One of my main criticisms with the party system I belonged to was that we did not spend enough time on the important things in political life. I believed that we did not raise the right issues in parliament on behalf of our constituents. I believed that the trivial and petty seemed to outweigh and be favoured over the critical, the crucial and the fundamental—the life and death matters.

I can remember being absolutely surprised and dumbfounded when a Vietnam veteran came to me with a problem. He said that his wife was stuck in a computer chair. She literally had to use a computer chair to get around in her house because she needed knee operations. The only way she could move around the house was on this computer chair. He said to me, 'We are actually thinking of breaking her legs and throwing her down the stairs because that way she would get the operation when she presents to the accident emergency ward; she wouldn't have to wait the five years it would take to get the knee and joint replacement.' I could not believe it. There was a successful resolution to that problem, too. They are the sorts of issues that confront members of parliament. People go blind waiting for simple cataract operations. If you say to a pensioner who requires a cataract operation and has diabetes, 'Look, you are going to have to find \$3,000 to have a private operation', you may as well say to them, 'Fly to the moon', because they just do not have that money. Right now people are going blind on waiting lists. It is those issues that motivate me.

You are expected to deal with a range of issues as varied as life and death matters such as cataract operations and suicides right through to, 'I was driving past the council slasher and it flew up a stone and it cracked my windscreen. What are you going to do about it?' That is the scope and range of the issues. If you are doing your job as a member of this place you will be overwhelmed by the sheer number and seriousness of matters placed before you. You will go grey—I am not looking at you, Paul—you will lose your hair; you will at times lose your mind when confronted with the problems brought to you by the very sad, desperate, bullied and lonely people that every society has—as long as you do not lose your soul and your family—so you had better have a system for prioritising the issues that people place before you because you only have a finite amount of energy and there are only 24 hours in the day and you should spend more time with your wife telling her how beautiful she is.

I did not think that the political party I was with was capable of prioritising the issues that came before every member of this place so I became an Independent and, along with my wife, family, staff, friends, designed a set of principles or guidelines for selecting issues to be raised in this place. I had never given too much thought to the priorities of issues or mission statements until I had listened to a speech by a local deputy headmaster who said that he, the principal and the school community had invested five months in creating a document that laid out their mission statement and strategic financial and educational goals and it was only half a page long. He said that even though it was a small document it was time and energy well invested. They put the modest document into the drawer and then when they felt they got lost they pulled it back out again to reassess and recheck it. Even if they felt they did not get lost they pulled it out and reconsidered their place in their academic and financial world.

Today I would like to share with you the less than half a page document of guidelines that I adopted when I became an Independent member of this parliament. These guidelines have shaped and influenced my thinking and actions as a member of this place and the issues that I prioritise and raise. There are seven principles—I do not have three. The first guiding principle or policy is to protect and care for all children; the second one is protect and care for all our sick, elderly and disabled; third, help empower first Queenslanders to live stronger, longer and healthier; fourth, advance social and economic policies which will ensure our families thrive and flourish; fifth, act as a responsible guardian of the environment; sixth, people will always come before political parties; seventh, give and serve without the thought of receiving.

After becoming an Independent I wrote a letter to the editor which expressed the frustration I felt when the most important of issues are not addressed in the Legislative Assembly. The letter says—

Dear editor, on a day when a breach in political advertising guidelines was one of the main thoughts on the LNP and the government's mind, I would like the readers to know that there were other more serious and substantive issues brought to the floor of the Queensland parliament by the Independents. Take, for example, the question that I put to the child safety minister about our state's obscene child and youth suicide rates. I was shocked and deeply disturbed when I discovered that Queensland's child suicide rate, the average of 16 per year, according to the Independent Commission for Young People was almost double that of other states. When you consider credible international studies like the OECD's with the Queensland government's own figures it made me very alarmed and sad to realise that children under the protection of this government were approximately 10 times more likely to die from suicide than other Australian children.

That is an example of the issues I think that the broader community and we as politicians should be concentrating on. I will close very shortly. Before I close I think that it is very appropriate and symbolic that I make these comments in the former Legislative Council or the upper house. I believe that in the future Independents can play an important part in the reform of the Queensland political process. It is only through conservative Independents, I believe, that this place will be restored to its former glory and contribute once again to our democratic system. Because Queensland is the only state and government in Australia without the checks and balances of an upper house, for decades both sides of politics have been allowed to pass bad legislation, waste taxpayers money and turn a blind eye to corruption.

While the community debate and decide how to reinstate an upper house, and it is going to be an uphill battle whichever way it goes, Independents will and can act as a de facto upper house and make any future Queensland government more accountable and less likely to act like an elected dictatorship. If the people of Queensland were to make Independents the de facto upper house after the next election then what you would see is a lot of political arrogance disappear from this precinct.

Instead of one political party, whoever it is, which may have an overwhelming majority tabling legislation and saying, 'Well, like it or lump it. We have the numbers. It does not matter what you say in the chamber on behalf of your constituents, how many insightful, logical commonsense revelations you grace the house of debate with, the deal is already done in the back rooms.' Instead of saying that, I would like to see the government of the day ditch that arrogant approach and respectfully approach both the Independents and/or the opposition before it reaches the chamber and say, 'What do you think of this? Will it be good for the people whom you represent? Oh, you would like clause 33 changed because you do not want people paying more taxes? Oh, yes, Mrs Cunningham, you can have that new hospital in Gladstone and, Mr Messenger, that new hospital in Bundaberg would be very fine.'

Ladies and gentlemen, lovers of democracy, when I became an Independent I was naturally accused of walking away from my political party. I argued the opposite. They walked away from me. The people shortly will decide who was right and who was wrong in the most democratic of ways. Whichever way they decide to vote, I hope that for the future of our state they and all the people of Queensland choose a local representative who will put their electorate first. Thank you.

Ms MALONE: We now have ample time for questions. We have more than 30 minutes for questions. We have one roving microphone. As this forum is being recorded and a transcript made by Hansard, your questions will be recorded as well so I would ask anybody asking a question to please wait until they are acknowledged, then wait for the microphone, indicate who you are and who it is you would like to direct your question to. We will take the first question from Roger Scott.

Prof. SCOTT: I was once a director-general but most of the time I have been an academic. I would like both of you to reflect on parliament during your period in parliament; we are a study of parliament group. Has it got better or worse? If it has got worse, what would you do to make it better?

Mr MESSENGER: Of course I am going to say that it is better now that there are more Independents, and I will tell you why. Before, when there were only four Independents, there were not enough for a quorum so if an Independent called 'No' or 'Divide' on a piece of legislation, there would be no formal vote taken and no recording by *Hansard*. Since there have been the five Independents or more, there have been instances where the Independents have decided to vote—for their own reasons and their own good conscience—as a block.

There have been a number of instances that I can recall—on the underground coal gasification, the City of Brisbane Bill and another few instances—where the Independents have forced the opposition to go over to the other side of parliament, literally, and stand and be counted with the government. That has created a greater awareness in the broader community of what happens in here, because *Hansard* then lists all those for and against a particular issue. That becomes helpful when you are prosecuting an argument in the broader community and you can say, 'Look, this is what the Independents did. We held the line. We voted in the best interests of our own electorate and what our people were saying to us, and this is the vote as it stands now.' So that small issue has caused headaches for both sides of politics.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: If I can just make a comment on Rob's answer—and do not take this the wrong way—the Independents have never caucused, so when Rob says that we voted en bloc it means that we have all just voted the same way. We do not caucus. I caucus—I caucus myself and I always win, and that is very good. The other caucus place is the shopping centre when the shoppers pull you up, and then they probably will win.

Has parliament improved or not? I do not believe it has over time. Wayne Goss was the Premier when I first got in, then Rob Borbidge was Premier for 2½ years and then the Labor Party has been in power ever since. I am not being insulting to any individuals when I say that I believe many of the Labor Party people who have got in more recently and have never been in opposition seem to have this sense that they deserve to be here. I know that some of the interjections across the chamber are ill-informed. I find it sad more than anything that sometimes interjections are made across the chamber that indicate that the information the newer members have been given in relation to the history in the chamber or the position that other members in the chamber have taken is not well grounded.

I think the current parliament has allowed for poor legislation to go through—not often but at times. I remember that several parliaments ago a fishing bill went through and the minister acknowledged there was a problem in the bill. Sorry, I will go into the detail because it illustrates why a house of review or closer numbers in the House would be more productive.

This bill was to allow fishermen to have greater flexibility in renewing their fishing licence. It acknowledged the reality that often the fishermen were out fishing when the licence became due and the legislation at the time meant that they were in breach of their licence because they were fishing unlicensed. The minister at the time introduced legislation that gave them some flexibility to renew that licence. The problem was that the bill said that the renewal would take effect on the day the application fee was paid, even though that could be several weeks apart from the date it fell due. What I and others in the

parliament said was that there was one clause that needed about three or four words removed from it to backdate that payment so that the licence was ongoing. And the minister refused to take out that one clause—it was a subclause—that would have backdated the renewal to the date of the previous expiry. Have I lost you yet?

The minister refused and there were not enough numbers in the House to make that amendment. So it meant that, if a licence fell due and the fisherman was out fishing and he did not renew it that day, for the two or three weeks intervening they were actually fishing without a licence and effectively breaking the law, and that was opposite to the bill's objective. That is just a trite example but it is an example of how a government with a big majority can be unwilling to make even those small changes that would create better legislation.

I think there are some areas where we have not travelled well, and with the majority in the Labor Party over such a long period of time there is an arrogance that has come in. I think it would be the same with any party, and potentially with the Independents as well. That is my view, anyway.

Prof. REYNOLDS: Thank you for your talks. They were very informative. I also say welcome back, Liz, because I remember you addressed us quite some years ago, not long after you came in.

I think there is always a problem here. The party system evolved in Queensland in the 1890s precisely because of the chaos that the Independents brought to the parliament. Governments lasted for 18 months between 1860 and 1915, and what happened was that people had absolutely no control over who was the government because an electoral cycle started and when the governments fell there was not an election; there was just merely horse-trading amongst the politicians. If you look at the curriculum vitae of colonial politicians, you will find that they have held almost every office there was to hold because there is a Buggins' turn situation.

The other situation is that we have a problem where everybody in parties are evil and Independents are virtuous. I can see there is a certain argument about that, but I am not going to prosecute the cause of the party system; there are a number of people here who can do that if they so choose.

What I wanted to ask relates to this: judging from my own research I did some time ago on Independents, it seemed that the crucial thing about Independents was what I called connectational politics. The Independents were connected into their electorate through networks—whether they be sacred, secular, community, educational or whatever. I would be very interested to hear from Liz and Rob to what extent they find this networking support for themselves because they do not have a party machine to support them and they have to rely on other support mechanisms. I would be very interested to hear a bit more about that.

Mr MESSENGER: Paul, you say that chaos is almost a bad thing. I probably would not say that chaos is all that bad a thing. I freely admit to being evil—I have a white cat that I regularly put in my lap and stroke and say, 'Mwahahaha!'

When you were describing the situation of the 1890s and the chaos then, I was thinking that one of the things that would have brought some order and structure and maybe some probity and integrity out of that chaos was the pecuniary interests register of those particular members. If there were systems in place where people had to declare their houses, their business interests and those sorts of things, there might have been a bit more semblance of order out of that chaos. I will talk about that systemic change.

As far as connectedness goes, yes, right now I am feeling pretty well connected. There are people who are willing to support me right now, today, as an Independent who would not have supported me when I was a member of a party. People are more likely to come along and support you and turn up to fundraising events if they know it is not a party fundraiser. Of course, there may be other people who might drop away. I do not know; we will find out in a few months time. I feel that with social media, the website and the email system that we have now—I will go back to the point that Liz was making about being a conduit for this place back into your electorate—there is more opportunity to do that and I am trying to use that as much as I can. I am feeling more connected but I will tell you in two months.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: Or three or whenever. Thanks, Paul. If I gave the impression that everyone who is involved in a party is an evil person, that was not my intent. I know a lot of people in this parliament and they are, in the main, very nice people. I think everybody enters parliament, whether as an Independent or a member of a party, intending to work hard for your community. What I have observed is the level of frustration of members in parties over time, particularly new members, with the party constraint placed on them to work for the electorate. That is very real.

In terms of chaos, I did not live in the 1890s, I do not know how chaotic it was and I am not a student of the parliament at that time. I would hazard a guess—and I may not survive parliament tomorrow when I say this—that there is still chaos but it is just managed better, and it is managed by the parties in the form of party discipline. They have their blues behind closed doors and anyone who dares to step outside and say they have had a blue behind closed doors gets at least a metaphoric clip around the ear. There is still chaos; it is just managed differently, I believe.

In terms of the social network for Independents, you are absolutely right. It is a hard road to hoe to be an Independent. You have to create a profile in your community. And it has become even more difficult because this parliament over time has changed the way people can feed into parliament. It used to be that not just conservative party people but conservative valued people would come from councils and that sort

of thing. That has been stopped to the extent that a very determined decision has to be made now by somebody working in a council—which is a great training ground for members of parliament—to actually make the change and make the decision to stand for parliament.

It is important that the person who is going to stand as an Independent has support in the community, and it is quite difficult to establish. I believe that there is a lot more work involved in creating that foundation within your electorate. I think every member of parliament goes to as many things as they can in their electorates—Independents equally and sometimes more. I have been accused of going to the opening of an envelope. That is okay: envelopes have to be opened, anyway. I have done a few toilet openings. Anyone who represents a rural seat will have been to the opening of the rural toilet block in the small community at the back of their electorate. They are great, with frogs in the loo and all of that. It is important to establish that support in your community. It is hard work but it is essential.

Mr MESSENGER: Just in addressing that issue of chaos, I would say that in the 1890s they did not have as good a Speaker as we do today. Oh, you are back in the room, Mr Speaker? It is good to see you!

Mr HOOLIHAN: I represent a seaside seat and an urban seat, but I still have a few of those little outback areas. I suppose I should mention a conflict of interest in relation to the chaos that was mentioned earlier because my great-great-uncle was Sir Thomas McIlwraith. Between 1873 and 1890 he represented I think three separate groups and, although there was no defined policy or defined groupings, there was always self-interest. When the Queensland National Bank went bust in the early 1890s, he was the managing director of the board; he was the Premier of Queensland. The Queensland National Bank held the Queensland Treasury and he was the major borrower to the tune of about £500,000. So maybe that pecuniary interests register that you mentioned, Rob, would have held but I do not think it would have stopped them.

You mentioned that the chaos is being better managed now. It is usually better managed because parties have a policy. They go to an electorate with a policy, and it is usually the members of that party who support that policy. What policy positions do you take as an Independent that will advance the community that you represent, because somewhere along the line you have to back the policy of one or the other of the parties? Could you outline that policy position?

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: Thanks, Paul. I think probably an overarching difference, just to start, is that the policies that I have would not have the detail that maybe the Labor Party would have or the Liberal National Party would have. But I do have policies and I put these out between elections and at election time. I have policies in relation to my views on the family. It is probably the core moral values that my electorate knows I will not move on. They are the values that I will defend and lose the seat on if it comes to that. So I have a policy that a child is important from conception and that marriage is an important institution in a community.

The other policies are broader. They are policies like the obligation of government—and I will support whichever side of government is heading down this path—to provide the needed infrastructure. Would I have the detail on that? I do now because I have been in my electorate long enough. But they are policies on infrastructure, our hospital, our roads, our harbour at the moment. So they are policies that in a very generic sense say that the community's wellbeing must be made a priority—so things like health, safety, policing and education, and the infrastructure and the resources to provide those are of infinite importance.

So my policy at an election would not be as detailed. I am saying that with some caution, because I do have a policy on the hospital that is detailed: 'We need greater services. We need these specialties,' and I list them off. But if I were new in an electorate as an Independent, I would be saying that we need better health services and increased policing because of our electorate growth, and we need better roads infrastructure. As I said, the party policy may be more detailed, but that gives my electorate an understanding of the direction that I believe the electorate should go in, and I will support in the parliament that side of government that gives me a guarantee of those infrastructure needs being met.

I am sure the statement that I have just made tonight will be used against me later on, but a generic statement made in the parliament along the lines of 'she's not going to vote for this because she doesn't care' is not true. As I said earlier in my talk, there is a primary responsibility to my own values set, a secondary responsibility to my electorate and a third responsibility to the broader community. So if in the legislation I am confident that the first and second responsibilities are being met then I will support it. That is, if it is about infrastructure spending on the hospital, I will support whatever the legislation is. So I do not know if that answers your question. The policies that I have as an Independent may be more broadbrush but they are there nonetheless.

Mr MESSENGER: That is a good question, Paul. I listed in my speech the guiding principles that I have. I would like to think that every policy initiative has to connect back to those core policy initiatives—protect and care for all children; protect and care for the sick, elderly and disabled; help empower first Queenslanders. Because I have been in the party system, I have been part of that formal policy creation. So I have a number of private members' bills that are on my website. I am putting forward mandatory sentencing for jail for people who have been convicted of seriously assaulting police officers and other public servants, so I have broadened that.

But the No. 1 issue that I would judge myself by is whether I could get a doubling of the health resources for the Bundaberg-Burnett area. It is that key issue that I guess I have cut my teeth on through this parliament. I have learned the most as a parliamentarian. For example, the AMA report came out and said that the average number of hospital beds per 1,000 head of population in Australia was 2.6. In Queensland it is 2.4. In Bundaberg it is about 1.1. It is obvious that every problem that arises within the health system in our region comes back to the fact that the nurses and doctors are all overworked, there are not enough beds and we just need greater health resources. So that is always going to be my No. 1 focus within the electorate.

Outside of the electorate and speaking in a general sense, I really do want to prevent any further asset sales. I believe that both sides of parliament have an agenda for asset sales. So I will be able to go to the next election with my hand on my heart saying, 'I am not going to vote for the further sale of assets. I will not vote for the sale of water. I will not vote for the sale of electricity assets. It's not going to happen.' That is the line in the sand. I desperately want to get a fairer share of the state wealth within the country area, so I am putting forward a broad policy of royalties for the regions. As to the exact amount, I do not know, but it will be modelled on the Nationals' Royalties for Regions in Western Australia. I think they get an extra \$1.2 billion and they funnel that back into an infrastructure fund that local councils can plug into and build that infrastructure.

The other thing that I would really like to see is reform of this parliament. I would like to see the re-establishment of an upper house. With the re-establishment of an upper house, within Indigenous politics, I believe that every piece of legislation that passes through this place should be spoken to from an Aboriginal and also from a Torres Strait Islander position. I have looked at dedicated seats. I believe that in New Zealand, I think in 1867—so just as this building was being completed—there were four dedicated Indigenous seats. Now I think the number is eight. I believe that it would profoundly change the complexion of Queensland and profoundly change our future if there were a dedicated Indigenous seat for both Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.

So, for every reason that we have those separate flags on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, we should have a dedicated seat here. That would not solve things overnight, but it would begin a process so that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren might see a very different Queensland, because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be able to come up with their own solutions. If you do not have a seat at the table when they are cutting up the pie, you are going to miss out. So for me, that is a fundamental change that I believe must, and someday will, happen.

Mr PYKE: I have a question particularly for Ms Liz, as Rumpole would have called you. You and Peter Wellington each have the unique experience of having been an Independent holding the balance of power. I know because I worked for Peter Wellington that he found that during his time as the 'member for the balance of power', as I often used to call him, he was not only representing his own electorate but the whole of the state of Queensland regarded him as an ombudsman, and the day the Labor Party got back government in its own right the frequency of phone calls to his office fell by 50 or 60 per cent. Did you have that same experience when you were the 'member for the balance of power'? Did you find that you were not only representing the people of your electorate but that half of Queensland relied on you to get on your white charger and right their wrongs?

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: Absolutely. It was the busiest time in my life, I think—a lot of late nights and a lot of people did phone. I have some regrets from that period to this extent: there were matters brought to me, particularly—these were the most difficult—ones that had a lot of time attached to them. They were issues that had been around a long time. They had been prosecuted by the aggrieved person over years usually. I did not have the staff or the information or the insight to know whether the issues were valid. Many of them were irresolvable but you still tried to bring the matter forward to the relevant minister.

There are only one or two—that is all there is—for which I wish I had more time to give to them to better understand the import of the issue and the implications of that matter, both then and into the future. You were called variously—and it would have been the same for Peter and I think for any Independent who holds the balance of power, including the ones federally now—in Queensland a 'single-person upper house' or 'the state's ombudsman', as Peter was called. But it was more so what was not said. It was an expectation on the part of people with a grievance who had been to their own member and who felt that their matter was valid—it certainly was important to them—who would come and want some assistance. Physically it was very difficult to give them time and also the time to gain an understanding of the validity of the issue. I think that would be the same for any Independent with the balance of power.

Mr GIBSON: To start my comments, the reason I got into politics was that we had an Independent—I was not a member of a political party—and I was the general manager of the paper. I know what we did not publish. There was a lot that we did not publish, like when she went shopping instead of being in parliament. There was a great deal of frustration in the community. You talked a lot about being connected to the community and representing the community. I would like to hear the views of both of you on the federal issue where we have had two Independents who have voted with the government on the carbon tax issue. Put that issue itself to the side. But certainly the polling shows that they have not represented their community. I would like to hear your views on how they have operated, because the community will not get a say now in dealing with them until the next general election. As Independents, you have that freedom to act, I guess, in a way that is not in line with what your community expects. I would be interested to hear what you think of your federal colleagues and how they have operated.

Mr MESSENGER: There are Independents and there are Independents. Believe me, Oakeshott and Windsor's actions have given me a lot of thought because, let's face it, they have poisoned the well as far as Independents are concerned. I have spent a bit of time thinking about it. Any member of parliament, whether they be an Independent or a member of a political party, should be there to represent the views of their electorate. I have made the case a number of times quite publicly and in the chamber that I do not believe that Oakeshott and Windsor are representing the views of their constituency. As you mentioned, the polls are saying that. So I believe that they are wrong. I think they have pulled the wrong rein on that.

For me personally—I will not get into an argument about climate change—I do not think they have done the right thing, it is as clear-cut as that. I could turn the argument around, as I have done recently, and say that your leader is acting like an Oakeshott and Windsor more than we are because I believe that there are issues out in the public, especially when it comes to asset sales. That is going to be the issue, I believe, going into the next election. So every member should tap into and get connected with their community and find out what they believe and how they think on certain issues, and that is going to be one of them.

Mrs CUNNINGHAM: In terms of Oakeshott and Windsor, I cannot pass a comment for a number of reasons. They have certainly done things that appear to be contradictory, but I was not in the briefings that turned their position. I do not have the information that they based their decision making on. From my own experience as an Independent with the balance of power, there are times when you are presented with a situation where in the microcosm you vote one way and in the macrocosm different factors come into play. I am not justifying anybody, but not all situations are like that. As I said earlier, there are a lot of issues in the parliament on which we represent our own electorate but they apply equally to the same state. When you are in a balance-of-power situation, it is not exactly the same as being there as a member looking at your electorate. You do look at things slightly differently—not completely differently but you do have to take different factors into account.

The other thing is that in our form of government you cannot always go back to your community and get the community's point of view. It is one of the things where the connectedness is important because you get to pull from your community their value set, the direction that they want to see the place going in. I do not have to go back to my electorate and say, 'Do you want more hospital services?' because I know that they do. And I know their views on daylight saving. That is a bit more divisive, but there is still a majority.

I was going to give you an example. I will give you this scenario: there was a matter before the chamber that more funding be given to people with disabilities—an injection of funding in the millions to be given to the disability sector. Had I gone to my electorate with just that as a bland statement they would have said, 'Yes, Liz, you should support that 100 per cent.' But there was detail that was not publicly known. It came up in the chamber on the night. It was a notice of motion, so it came up that morning and we debated it that night. It was a 'screamer'. Sorry, that is the affectionate name for the notice of motion. Well, I think it is affectionate.

But what was not clearly known was that the motion was to draw money out of the Treasurer's emergency fund and that it could not be recurrent funding because the Treasurer's emergency fund is for floods and cyclones and that sort of thing. It would have established an expectation within the disability community and a need for that recurrent funding to continue and it could not be because it was from the Treasurer's emergency fund. It was a political stunt because the chamber gallery had been stacked with disability sector people, and so they obviously wanted more money justifiably. I voted against the motion. If all of those facts were put to the community, they would probably have had a different view in terms of giving direction to me in the way that I should vote.

I actually had to go out to speak at a function the same night after parliament rose and we had had that debate. That night sticks in my mind because the sad part about it was that it was a wet night and on the footpath outside this place were people in wheelchairs waiting for cabs. They were brought in very happily but then they were just left to find their own way home. So there is all of that that has to be considered if you are in a balance-of-power situation. You have to deal with the issue but you have to deal with the politics as well. I cannot answer for them. It is not an enviable position to be in, but it is manageable.

Ms MALONE: Are there any further questions? Thank you very much. That was a very lengthy and comprehensive question session. I would now like to call on Dr Paul Reynolds to give a vote of thanks.

Prof. REYNOLDS: My partner and I got an outdoor furniture set delivered on the weekend in preparation for Christmas. I said to him, 'Can I give you a hand?' He said, 'Yes. Stay away.' Thank you very much, Liz and Rob, for a very insightful and interesting sort of 'day in the life of'. I was reminded ineluctably of the famous statement or speech that Edmund Burke made to his electors at Bristol—I think it was about 1780. There were no political parties of course in the House of Commons at the time, although a lot of placemen were put there by the King to do the King's bidding. But, for those of you who remember the speech, Burke made a careful distinction between being the representative of his voters and a delegate, and he would not be a delegate for those who elected him. Of course the electoral system was rotten to the core—very much Queensland pre-1989. So what he was saying was, 'Yes, I will go to Westminster as your representative, but I must decide myself as your representative taking into account the great issues of the time.' The American war was on, for example. The French were at war with Britain and so on. So he put his local responsibilities within a global context.

I think for people who go to parliament as Independents there is always that dilemma. You cannot speak for your community because you do not have a unitary community; you have a pluralistic community. Therefore, you must do the balancing act between what Liz called your core values and what you perceive to be in the best interests of your geographical electorate. And you have given us two very good and prescient examples of how an individual can approach that outside the party system. Those members in the room who are members of political parties of course do it in a different way, but it is useful to hear the alternative way and how it is done. I thank you for your time and for the evident trouble that you both went to with your speeches. You have had a very appreciative audience. I know that we will all join in thanking you once more in the usual way. Thank you.

Ms MALONE: Thank you, Paul. I now bring the event to a close and invite everyone to join us on the President's verandah for refreshments.