



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

***Reflections on 25 years in
the House of
Representatives and the
Senate***

THURSDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 1999
Parliament House
Brisbane

Reported by Parliamentary Reporting Staff

Dr REYNOLDS: Ladies and gentlemen, may I welcome you to this our last meeting for the Queensland Chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group for this year. It gives me great pleasure to welcome to our gathering Kathy Sullivan. Kathy is unique in a sense because she served both in the Senate and in the House of Representatives. I almost knew her before she was elected. She denies this, but she did run the Architecture Faculty at the University of Queensland. I chaired a public meeting in 1974 for the double dissolution. Kathy, Bob Winsley, Mal Colston and a couple of other people were there. I think Kathy was the only person who got up at that time. That has to be something of a distinction. I threatened her with anecdote. I will tell it, because it is illustrative of how things have changed.

In 1980 I was the president of the staff association at the University of Queensland. We were having our annual union conference in Canberra. There was a question of higher education on the political agenda as there seems to have been for the last 30 years. As constituent members from different States, we were asked if we would convene a meeting with Senators from our States and put whatever point of view it was—I cannot remember what it was. It seemed important at the time. Kathy very graciously convened a meeting of the coalition colleagues. We met in Kings Hall. As it transpired, Kathy could not get a committee room for us to meet in on the Senate side of Kings Hall. She secured one on the House of Representatives side. She, Neville Bonner and David MacGibbon, a couple of other people were there and we were there. Kathy led the delegation through because she had convened the meeting. As we were about to go through the doors into the House of Representatives side of Kings Hall, an attendant stood up and said to Kathy, "Where do you think you're going, girlie?" It was a sad and rather chastened attendant by the time Ms Senator Martin, as she then was, had finished with him. That was 1980, but that is within living memory, although my students do not believe us, of course. They think that was the Dark Ages. However, they are now spelling Bjelke-Petersen's name wrongly in essays, so it makes for a sense of *deja vu* of the most hideous variety. That was the anecdote. Without further ado, thank you for addressing us.

Ms SULLIVAN: Thank you very much, Paul. Joan Sheldon, former parliamentary colleagues—albeit from the State House—Colin Lamont and Bill Hewitt, a number of familiar faces, ladies and gentlemen—I am not trying to be overly formal: I just feel more comfortable when I am speaking if I stand. Paul told me that he was going to tell an anecdote and said that I may or may not remember it. I do not remember it, Paul, but when you were halfway through it, I knew what it was going to be, because it happened so often. The other side of that coin is that these days, on the House of Representatives side—and God knows it is a hike to get to the Senate side; I very rarely step foot there; I only ever see House of Representatives attendants—they are as likely as not to call me Senator, even though the people who work there never knew me when I was Senator. Perhaps that says something about House of Representatives attendants. I am not terribly sure what. It has always been a challenge. That anecdote actually was very symbolic of times gone by.

Paul suggested that I might give a 25-year perspective of women in politics. Over this year, I have made a number of speeches, basically on the theme of being in Parliament for 25 years as a female member of Parliament. Even leading up to this year, which was my 25th anniversary, in recent years when I have talked about women in Parliament—and usually the invitation is couched along the lines of "We would like to hear how things have changed"—I feel not a reluctance but a wariness about it. Looking back to 1974—and really my journey started in 1973 from the time I was endorsed as a candidate to run for the Senate—I sometimes feel like a walking, talking fossil, because in so many ways the world I came from into politics and into Parliament has changed enormously. I think it is important that people, particularly young women, know something about that time, know something about the things that have changed, so that there can be some appreciation of what the momentum is or has been. For myself, I very rarely look back 25 years. Politics is not like that.

I talk to a lot of school students. I like to visit the schools in my electorate and talk to them. You may or may not be aware that in Year 7 in Queensland schools the students learn about the political system. I like to go and talk to the Year 7 students. I essentially talk about what I do as a member of Parliament, as a way of explaining how the system works and how all the pieces fit together. At question time I very commonly get the question: "What are some of the

things you have achieved?" It is like you set up monuments along the path. Politics, of course, is not like that; it is a continuum.

When I went into Parliament I sat in the Members' Dining Room—that lovely old Members' Dining Room that was so much like a boarding house dining room. You had eight to a table with your own allotted waitress and if you were not feeling too well she would stroke your brow and think of something that might make you feel a bit better. It was lovely. The men had them well trained. They had been looking after men for years. I sat at the table there with people who had been in Parliament for a long time. I had been very actively involved in politics for 14 years. I was always a zealot from the day I joined. Colin and I belonged to a branch that for years used to meet—would you believe—weekly. That is how keen we were. We went to branch meetings every week and then to all the other meetings. With all that zealotry and activity behind me, I sat at the dining room table and heard what were new colleagues to me—people who had been there quite some time—talking about colleagues who had recently left, who had been there 20 to 25 years and I had never heard their name.

It brought to me my first lesson of politics, that is, that very few people get their names into the history books. Getting your name into the history books and building monuments and having those little things that have your name on them is not really what politics is about. Politics is a process. We individuals are shadows that pass across the stage. When we exit left, our names are gone to all intents and purposes. Your name is not what is important; it is the role you play in the process. That is true of politics. It is true also of women in Parliament. However, if you want to be part of that scene, it is important that you understand the system and the process. When I entered Parliament, how it was for women was utterly different from how it was for men. It was utterly different for women then from what it is for women now. There are still other things that have to change.

I guess the overall message I would want to give is that the position of women in politics has changed very remarkably, but the impact on the political process and the structures has not been big enough. The change has to be greater. I suspect there are a lot of men who, when they hear a statement like that, think "Oh hell! What are they whingeing about now?" Before I start my real story, I would like to refer to the recent referendum. To my great surprise I turned out to be a republican. I have not been a republican in my entire life. When I really had to think about it, I realised that I was indeed a republican. I therefore had a very particular interest in how women voted. The opinion polls as they came through and even more so at the end showed that women were very strongly anti the proposition that was being put. I heard apologists—if you would call them that—give their explanation for why women might feel this way. I will give my own explanation, and people are as welcome to take as much exception to it as I do to the other explanations I heard of the women's vote. It tended to go along the lines of "They are so busy with the children or the housework or whatever." There was a correlation between educational standard and voting intention. I might say that I never saw the right breakdown for women in those terms. I would be interested in it.

I have a different theory. I think women generally see politics as what the boys do. This is not to say they would not go into it. I am talking about your general mass of women in the community. They see it as a very male thing. They see it as a male thing, because the overwhelming image of politics that the general public gets is question time in the Federal Parliament. That turns just about everybody off, but the question time image is one of a rather brutal, competitive power play, one of people trying to get on top of one another. That is a bit of politics, but it is not the whole story. That is very alienating. It is generally alienating for people, but I think it is particularly alienating for women. I do not think Australian women identify with our political process at all. When you put a question to them about changing the power play, really I think they just want the say, "Go away; this is something we just don't approve of at all or like." I will come back to that point because I think it is relevant to women's role in Australia these days.

If I go back 26 years to my preselection—and there are a couple of people in this room who were there that night—then I talk about a different world. I give lots of those funny stories. I dined out at Rotary and other places for years on those stories. I used to always have to give a different version of the story according to where I was talking—at the CWA, all women; Rotary, all men; or a Rotary ladies' night, where it was mixed—because the things the women would laugh themselves sick at, the men would wonder what on earth I was talking about and so on. It was

always modified. There are lots of those sorts of stories about being thought to be someone's secretary. I was accused once by an airline clerk of travelling under false pretences, on my boss' ticket, because the ticket was for Senator Martin. There have been all sorts of mistaken identity.

Actually my favourite House of Representatives attendant story is about when I was going into the Government party room in the Fraser Government days and the party room entrance door was halfway down a corridor. At the end of the corridor there was an attendant's box. There were three attendants sitting like crows on a fence, because from there you actually went into the Prime Minister's suite. We are talking about the early 1980s. I had been there since 1974. I was late, so there were not a whole lot of other people around. I walked down the corridor, I turned to go into the party room, and this voice came ringing down the corridor, "Hoy!" I knew in a flash what was going to happen next, but I was more offended by the "Hoy" than anything else. I stopped and said "Yes?" I used to teach school; I can freeze them in a glance. The attendant said, "You can't go in there." I said, "Are you sure?" Three attendants said, "Oh, sorry", and slunk back down behind their counter. The point of that story is that not only was the assumption that "here's this young blonde female and she does not belong", but that you can also be rude at the same time no matter where you are. Those were the gentlemen who guarded the entrance to the Prime Minister's suite and that was the way they behaved. That is to me the story that sums up that side of it.

The time came and I made a change to the House of Representatives. In that previous 10 years, I used to give a speech at all those places that I talked about that I used to entitle "Yes, but what's it really like?" That title came from conversation. When I was in the Senate, people would say to me, "What's it like being a woman Senator?" I said, "It is really just like being a male Senator." They would say, "Yes, but what's it really like?" As if, "Yes, we know you have to say that; but, come on, give us the goods." The fact was that in the Senate itself I never felt out of place. I was one of four women—two Government, two Opposition. They were small numbers, but there was never any feeling other than I was part of a team. Sure the male Senators would open the door and they would pull out the chair. I just call that being cherished. I do not mind being cherished. They have noticed I am female. I never mind if men notice I am female. That is a compliment. That has nothing to do with equality; that has everything to do with sex, and that is a separate subject. But out in the electorate, it was different. In that sense, I suppose those House of Representatives attendants were the electorate symbolised in Parliament House.

I went through a process for quite a long time of what I used to call "looking for the second head". As I travelled around Queensland and met shire chairmen and mining executives and whatever, I was always aware that they were not totally comfortable. As we got on with the business of the day, I could feel the relationship change and they would realise that I did indeed not have a second head—only one, just like the fellows. Over time, with more acceptance of women in public life, that dissipated. The press, of course, were something else. Press are very strong on caricatures, particularly when it comes to political people. I was expected to be the personification of all their caricatures of Germaine Greer or anybody else. That was more of a challenge. That was a two-edged sword. In the Senate, you live or die by publicity, because your electorate is so vast, the numbers are so huge and you do not have the personal relationships you do in the House of Representatives or in a State seat. In the Senate, it is just so big. The press is your key to everything, but there is such a thing as bad publicity in politics. It was a two-edged sword: it was good to get the publicity to get the name known, but I had to work very hard at making sure it was the right sort of publicity.

Then came the House of Representatives. I changed Houses. I have friends in the House of Representatives. I have sat in the party room with people for 10 and a half years. I did not really expect anything to be very different in Parliament. I was expecting the difference again to be in the electorate. The reverse was the fact. The electorate accepted me, no questions asked. Perhaps they were used to me, because I had been around a long time. Maybe they were just used to the idea of women. The electorate just expected me to do my job of representing them. The House of Representatives was a different animal altogether. I used to sneak out of the Senate and listen to House of Representatives debates. I had been doing that for a few years. I had a secret hankering that I never thought I would get a chance to indulge myself with. It was the creation of new seats in 1984 that enabled me to do it. The Reps was different. I was fortunate that I did have some good friends, people like Don Cameron. We joined the same

branch of that Young Liberals on the same night, and we had known each other for a long time. There were others who were good friends. But somehow I was not part of it. I just knew instinctively that I was not part of it, but I could not put my finger on why.

I thought for some time that it was because I was a Senator. Members of the House of Representatives do not think that Senators are real members of Parliament. The first thing that I had to do was prove that I was a real member of Parliament. The best way you do that is by increasing your majority at the next election. You do it in a whole lot of other ways, too; but once you do that, they accept that you know how to be a member of the House of Representatives and perhaps you have earned your place there. The first time does not prove it. We got through that. But still something was not quite right.

Then along came the Affirmative Action Bill in 1987. We had been through the sexual discrimination legislation. That was a fair sort of a challenge. I was shadow Minister for Home Affairs and Admin. Services. That was the arts and Government nuts and bolts—talk about from the ridiculous to the sublime. I represented Ian McPhee, who was our shadow on Women's Affairs in the Senate. The Sexual Discrimination Act was debated first in the Senate, because it was Sue Ryan's Bill. I was the Opposition person who handled that. I had a bit of difficulty, because I was supposed to move amendments for the Opposition, and I did not really know what they were talking about. I would get all these lawyers out. I knew what the Bill was about, but I could not see what their problem was. That was the problem. I had to go into the Senate and pretend that I knew what the amendment was about and then not really argue the case, because I could not, because it was very obviously bowled over and the Labor Party was right or whoever was arguing against me was right. So I just sat down and shut up, which is what I would have liked to have done in the first place.

It was particularly the sexual harassment legislation that people were getting really uptight about. I could not understand what they were talking about. I tried to get through to my male colleagues that it might be their sons that we were talking about, not just their daughters—that there was a more general application. They did not know what I was talking about, so I gave up. I had been through all of that and got through okay. I thought that the Liberal Party had come through that fairly well. The legislation was actually supported by the coalition, although we did try to move a few amendments, which I do not think would have made much difference to it if we had been successful. I thought that, having got that level of acceptance, we must be on the right track. Along came the Affirmative Action Bill, which was not a positive discrimination Bill at all; it was a self-examination and educative instrument. My colleagues went berserk. They really, it seemed to me, took leave of their senses and could not hear what that Bill was about. You could not have a conversation with them. I suddenly found myself on the end of some very abrasive and rude personal stuff. I got the message that somehow or other I personified this thing that had got them so agitated. I could not pin down what that was.

Then I made my speech, and I spoke about education. Many of my speeches in Parliament have been about education. I am a passionate believer in education. I was tying education into the change in women's status and the change of attitudes towards women, but essentially talking about education. The debate went over two days. We have a *Daily Hansard*, so what you have said in Parliament today is in people's hands in print the next morning. The next day, I was approached by one of my colleagues, with whom I had sat on our education policy committee for as long as he had been in Parliament, which was not as long as I had been. He had been on the committee with me. I had always been on that committee. I had been chairman or secretary or something of it. I had lots to say about education in his company every week in Parliament. He came up to me and said in a fairly challenging way, "I have read the speech you made yesterday." By this stage I was getting a bit defensive and thinking, "Here it comes again." I said, "Yes?" He said, "I didn't realise we agreed on so many things." I thought, "Where has this man been?" I had not said anything different from what I had said dozens of times in the education committee, in the party room or wherever, and the penny dropped. In all the years I had been in Parliament—13—there was a whole raft of guys who shut their ears every time I got on my feet, because they thought that they knew what I was going to say. They had never actually heard it.

I will jump forward another three years, post the 1990 election, when the composition of the coalition changed somewhat. In 1990 there was a big swing against Labor in South Australia

and notably Victoria. There was a large number of coalition members. There was a big swing in Western Australia, too, but not too many of them got over the line; the big numbers came in 1993. All of a sudden, things were different. Men were getting up in the party room and raising issues that matter to women. Men were talking about child care, breast cancer and so on. I like to talk about other things, too; but when nobody is going to raise it if you do not, then you have to do it. I was thinking, "Well, this is lovely." Finally it dawned on me. The Fraser Government got a landslide in 1975. It got nearly the same numbers in 1977, went backwards somewhat in 1980 and went out of Government in 1983. It picked up a few new members in 1984, because of the new number of seats. It lost some more in 1987. From 1975 to 1990—a span of 15 years—we had barely a drop of new blood. The memory and knowledge of the real world that I had been working with since 1975 was 15 years out of date. Parliament is a very conservative institution in that sense. The people who come in are contemporary at that time; but the longer they stay, the less contemporary they are. I was working with people who had never worked with a woman ever in their lives. They had never seen women working as peers in the work force, in business or the professions. The last woman in Parliament on our side had lost her seat in 1969. She was there for only three years. Kay Brownbill got in in the 1966 landslide and was out in 1969. I was the first in 15 years. Prior to that there was a 15-year gap from Dame Enid Lyons to Kay Brownbill. In 33 years there had been one woman there for three years. Then came me. By 1984 I was working with people whose life experience was getting rapidly out of date.

To some extent that has changed remarkably. It has changed for only one reason, not because the political parties got altruistic. The process the Labor Party has gone through to get more women into Parliament has been well publicised. It has been fairly brutal. You hear any Labor woman talk about the process and just what the women in the Labor Party went through to try to get up their resolutions at their conference, and you will know it was really pretty strenuous. The process on our side has been different, but I think it does owe something to the fact that Labor started to be successful. Finally, we got a leader, John Hewson, who said to women, "I want more women in Parliament." I used to say to Andrew Peacock that it would only take the leader to say, "I want more female members of Parliament" and the organisation would cooperate. I said that the leader would start to set the tone. Hewson did it. Hewson was very good on the subject of women in public life, in Parliament and in the professions and so on. He was genuine about it. Really, that was the beginning. From there, various organs in the party, women in the party, got very organised and went out and encouraged women to stand and trained them up.

None of that happened for reasons of altruism on either side of politics. I contrast the two. It happened because the public was demanding it. It happened because once one side did it, the other side saw that there were votes in it. It happened because it would just be ridiculous in this day and age, given the sort of favour and mix and facts of our community, if women were not in Parliament, too, because they are in everything else. That is not to say that you can ever take it for granted, that it was guaranteed. I worried in the late 1980s and worried out loud in some speeches that I thought women were dropping the ball. I worried about it because I was meeting particularly female lawyers and journalists—they were probably about 23—who, whenever I made a speech, would say, "Oh, it is not like that any more", like I was already the fossil. "I don't encounter any discrimination." I would say to the journalists, "So where are the female editors?" Are there any female journalists here tonight? I would like to know where those female editors are. To the lawyers I would say, "So where are the female judges?" Did they think they were so much better than every woman who went before them that there were not women who were good enough to do what they were doing, who for some reason did not go as far as the guys? They never asked those questions. We have some female judges, but that is only because they are appointed by politicians and the political pressure could come on. We still do not have our female editors of major dailies. We do not even have many, if any, female chiefs of staff. That area has to move. It is a lot harder to put pressure on the press, of course.

Things still are not right. I come back to the beginning. What is the reason for that disenchantment of women? Why is it that so many of them women do not want to know about the power process? I am talking about women in general. I do not think women ought to stand for Parliament because we need more women in Parliament; let them stand for Parliament if they want to be in Parliament. I am not criticising them for not being more politically active. Whenever

people make a generalisation about women or men, I say, "Well, hang on. What's the male equivalent or what's the female equivalent?" Men are busy too. Men are busy with their jobs and their whatever and so on. I do not think men were any more interested in the referendum. They just felt more affinity, I think, with thinking about those issues, because it is a male game. The structure is male. It is not because there are not women in it.

I do not know what Yin and Yang is, so I will not say that. I will do the positive and negative. If we think about men in politics, men playing politics, we can put a bunch of positive characteristics and we can put a bunch of negative characteristics. You can do the same for women. All too often, this debate happens in terms of: let us look at all the male negatives and let us look at all the female positives and never balance it up. What are the male negatives? How do they express themselves in politics? We have a brutally adversarial system. It is combative and it is highly competitive. We hear that women do not like it, so they walk away from it. There are pluses in that, too. What are the things in the structures of our society and politics that have been structured by men, which very much reflect maleness, that are positive? There is achievement. There is wanting to do better. There is reward for effort. It is all a male structure. That is all good. What would the women say? They would say that they are consultative versus combative. They would say that they are considerate. They would say that they care about the social, the human, the warm, touchy, feely side. Those are the positives, which always get put up against the negatives, I think quite unfairly. You should put those positives with those positives. Let us look at the good things that are very male and let us look at the good things that are female and somehow get them together. There is a list of negatives for females. I am not going to say what they are. Most women in this room who have worked in an all-female situation would know what I mean. I am not going to go into it, because I do not think it matters. I think you have to be very careful of that kind of rhetoric, but I think we have to look at it. If we will not look at it, then we are still not going to have a public, much less a female public, that is going to care about the political process.

I abhor question time. I do not know why it has to be the way it is. It upsets me more and more the older I get. Maybe I get crankier. I do not think so. I think I am still basically a patient person, but I am impatient with the fact that people can be so critical of this process and nothing happens. Do you know why it does not happen? Because the boys do not want it to change—on both sides. They want it that way. They enjoy that daily shout and verbal gouge and everything else like you cannot believe. I do not think it should be pencils down and hands away. I think Parliament should be vigorous. I think a Government ought to be able to defend itself under vigorous attack. But I do not think it has to be rude and loud. I really think the biggest problem Judy Moylan had as a Minister was not what happened with aged care; it was the fact that she had a small voice. When she got up at the dispatch table and tried to shout over the male cacophony that was drowning her out, she simply went higher and did not have the volume. I really think, if you ever play back a whole lot of video tapes of her under attack, you would find it would not be the Jenny Macklin question that defeated her; it was that barrage of noise that meant she could not get her answer out as coherently as she was perfectly capable of doing. I think politics and Parliament should be vigorous and strenuous and should push you, but I do not think it should physically intimidate you. I think that is quite inappropriate. They are the sorts of things that have to change before women will really have their impact.

The question I am most often asked now is not, "What's it really like?" It is, "How has it really changed? Has it really made a difference?" Yes, it has. It has made a difference to the agenda. It has made a difference to things that Governments and Oppositions are forced to address. The really nice thing is that the men—or some of them, the newer men—are getting into it, too. Finally the penny has dropped that women vote and women are going to expect that certain concerns they have are attended to. But we do really have to address the structures.

When I was that very new Senator going back and being asked the question about what it is really like to be in Parliament, if I got into conversation and people probed and said, "Yes, but what about Parliament; it is very male." I would say—and it has been printed in newspapers, so I am not making it up in retrospect—"You have to understand that Parliament is first and foremost a men's club." Men do clubs very well, very nicely. They have had centuries of practice. They know how to do clubs. They do not mind women being in them, provided we do not want to change the rules. Then they get a bit aggro. I think perhaps the time has come when there is

Australasian Study of Parliament Group (Queensland Chapter)
Reflections on 25 years in the House of Representatives and the Senate

enough women and it is important enough for us to say, "Some of the rules have to change." That is the point I make.

Having announced my retirement, I am so sorry that I am not going to be part of the process of getting on with changing the rules. I know there is another generation of women who will do that very well indeed. I admire them. They come from all sources. I see them sitting around me, which is wonderful; I see them sitting opposite. I think "My, how the landscape has changed." It has changed for the better—not just for appearance, but very much for the substance: what is coming, where the roots are and the fruit that is being born.
