

**Introduction to Session Two**  
**Community participation-Member education**

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Good morning everyone. I am delighted to be able, albeit in a very brief way, to participate in this seminar celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the House of Representatives Committee System. And celebrate is the right word. Overall the Committee System has been an outstanding success. It has and is a coming together of a trinity; parliamentarians, public servants and the community.

In introducing this session I have time only to concentrate on two issues.

ONE – The effect of committee work on Policy Development.

TWO – Members expectations of Committee Secretarial support and Community input in relation to both electorate and committee work.

The first is a practical recollection of what's past. The second a more theoretical view of what's possible in the future.

The Committee example I will use is Education and Training. Today terms like early intervention, literacy and numeracy, technical education, boys education and so on are central to the education debate. That was not the case when I arrived in Canberra. In preparing for my maiden speech in 1988 I wanted to include a section on early intervention. I searched the parliamentary Hansard for what others had said. I found but one brief mention in October 1975 some thirteen years earlier. Essentially the term was never used.

Quite soon into my term I got myself onto the Labor Caucus Education Committee and within a year I was on the House of Representatives Education, Training and Employment Committee. Interestingly the Chair of that Committee was John Brumby, the current Premier of Victoria. As a former primary school principal and architect of a resources campaign for primary schools it was no surprise that one of the first initiatives I tried to develop was an

enquiry into literacy, numeracy, early intervention and the resources deficit in both public and private primary schools.

After a couple of Labor Caucus Education meetings I moved a motion incorporating these matters. I was greeted with silence and then more silence. The Chair declared these matters were State not Federal. Nonsense I replied. The Commonwealth spends billions of dollars on schools. Surely it ought to know if its expenditure is wisely spent or not.

Silence again. Lowering of heads. Incomprehensible mumblings. Well I recognised what was happening. I was getting the treatment. Will someone second the motion and allow a debate to take place. Silence. The motion lapsed. Welcome to politics.

However, at the end of that year in 1988 I was fortuitously seated in the members dining room with four other colleagues, Mary Crawford and Elaine Darling from Queensland, Carolyn Jakobsen from Western Australia and Roger Price from New South Wales. To my surprise I learned all four had similar experiences in Education Committees in both the then current and past Education Committees. We resolved to do something about it. We did. After the 1990 Federal election Mary Crawford became chair of the House of Representatives Parliamentary Committee on Education and I became chair of the Labor Caucus Committee.

We resolved to bring on the early intervention, literacy and numeracy and resources deficit in primary schools enquiry. I wrote a white paper that also introduced vocational and technical education and it was subsequently presented to the Caucus Committee, and favourably received, with one exception, the Minister. He instructed me to collect all copies of the paper and shred them. I should have refused but I complied. A Junior Minister then assisted and the Literacy and Numeracy only Report was commenced. That it still gets front page treatment in the national media says something of its value.

However as a new government makes it agenda on an education revolution that can only be achieved if an audit is undertaken on educational expenditure. For exactly the same reasons why Labor in Government rejected a resources allocation enquiry so too did the Howard Government. It should be refused no longer.

The obvious conclusion is that educational expenditure in this country is driven not by sound educational philosophy nor rationale but by historical tradition and privilege. And that is exactly right. Until an appropriate resources allocation expenditure audit is conducted in this nation ALL and I repeat ALL educational initiatives no matter how meritorious will be diminished. There's a challenge for you all!

But back to the "Literacy Challenge" Report. The language and ideas constructed by parliamentarians and the secretariat in that report are now conventional wisdom. Ministers and shadow ministers repeatedly claim ownership of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, arguments and data that was constructed by parliamentarians on both sides of the parliament and by members of the secretariat of the House of Representatives Education Committee.

That report, like many others, stands as a testament to the very best qualities and attributes of the public service, parliamentarians from all sides of politics and the community. Reports like the Literacy Challenge sustain relations in a very positive way between public servants, parliamentarians and the community and that collaboration should never be underestimated.

However not all committees are successful at all times. Successful and productive human relationships are a TRINITY and that trinity is the same for parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and community organisations. All groups need people strong in ideas, process and outcome in order to succeed. In most circumstances people fall naturally into each category. However they can of course fulfil different roles in different circumstances.

Essentially "Ideas" people will have a background in philosophy, logic, have strong personal beliefs and will possess analytical skills. Unfortunately few ideas people get pre-selected by major political parties. Few are in the public service either. Twenty years ago 100,000 Australian students studied pure mathematics and logic. Today the figure is less than 15,000. No wonder analysis is found wanting and there is an over-reliance on synthesis in political commentary.

Too few people in the Parliament have been exposed to philosophy or analysis. There are reasons why this is so. Many genuine thinkers are unpredictable, difficult to control and in an age of spin, celebrity and manipulative democracy they are not sought out.

People skilled in process are a significant group in the Parliamentary staff and thank goodness for that. However people skilled in outcomes are the predominant majority in parliamentary life. And most are very good at it.

But it is worth stating very strongly that if the idea is wrong, so will the process and so will the outcome. If the process is wrong so will the outcome even if the idea is right. Success is coherence of all three.

People strong in ideas can be enthusiastic, passionate, exciting, rude, a bit mad, and lacking in social skills and sometimes only 10% of what they say is relevant. But that 10% can be right on the money. That is why “Process People” are so valuable.

They can recognise a good idea. They can separate the wheat from the chaff. They can translate a raw idea, often in a misunderstood form, into a state the rest of us can understand.

If ideas and process people go missing committees may find themselves in endless hours of meetings, with negotiations going nowhere, facilitation of non-identified givens, interpretation of worthless material, contradictory mission statements and performance criteria all sinking under the weight of pointless anecdotal self-indulgences and slick presentations. The substance, contribution and influence of committees like these are absolutely zero; a nadir, zilch.

And yes I was on one of those committees too; blessedly briefly. However when ideas, processes and outcomes are shared, debated and collaborated upon the relationships of all on the committee are enhanced. Personally and professionally, being on a House Committee can be one of the great learning experiences of your life. Very few people get the opportunity to hear and experience first hand the views of so many Australians on matters that are of concern to them too.

One word of caution. If your House Committee travels one Committee is enough. Good Luck! I hope someone in this Parliament has the foresight to convince the current government to initiate an audit of educational expenditure and justify with evidence the glaring differentials to various sectors of education based on no educational rationale whatsoever.