

Parliamentary Architecture and Political Culture

Australian Senate Occasional Lecture Series

9 May 2008

Clement Macintyre
School of History and Politics
The University of Adelaide

In Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes of the fall of Satan from Heaven (that, in turn, presages the fall of man), and he describes the design and building of Pandemonium. This was the capital of Hell, and it was where an assembly gathered to debate 'Their state affairs'.¹ Book 1 concludes with an account of their deliberations:

In close recess and secret conclave sat
A thousand demi-gods on golden seats,
Frequent and full. After a short silence then
And summons read, the great consult began.²

Milton was not describing the Parliament of Australia (or the 1000 voice 2020 summit), but he may, however, have anticipated some aspects of it. Without wanting to labour the analogy too far, drawing some parallels between Pandemonium and the Parliament is tempting. Milton's Pandemonium emerged from the ground after a 'crew / Opened into the hill a spacious wound'.³ It was built 'in an hour' and 'with incessant toil' by 'hands innumerable'.⁴ Then, when the members of the council entered, they swarmed in like bees – as the Great Hall of Pandemonium reduced the figures to the size of insects.⁵

Today we are gathered in a building that emerged from a wound in a hill, a building that was produced by innumerable hands⁶, and parts of it at least, are of a scale that can intimidate and overawe the many who visit it. And while it may not have been built in an hour (though anyone who has seen the time lapse film of the building of the Parliament may be forgiven for thinking it was), the fast tracking construction techniques meant it was built with

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 775, John Leonard (ed), Penguin, London, 2003. I am grateful to Heather Kerr for advice and assistance with sections of this paper.

² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 795-8.

³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 685-6.

⁴ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 697-9.

⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 767-70.

⁶ *Australia's Parliament House. The meeting place of our Nation*, Joint House Department, Canberra, 1989 suggests that more than 10,000 workers were employed in the building of the Parliament, p. 26.

great speed. Perhaps more obviously, we can make the connection between 'pandemonium', a by-word for a rowdy and chaotic environment, and the occasional unruly behaviour of MPs during critical debates or Question Time that is reported so lovingly by the television news and other media.

However, as anyone who looks below the immediate surface and spends more than a few minutes observing the Parliament knows, the image presented on the nightly news of the shouting, conflict and abuse that can sometimes dominate the set piece presentations is an unfair characterisation. The bulk of the work that takes place is done in a more orderly and civil environment. But whether it is pandemonium, or sober and responsible policy setting and law making, there can be no argument that what takes place in this building shapes the patterns and values of the nation. It is where our 'state affairs' are debated.

This is self-evident with regard to the laws that are made. Yet, it is also true in the way that debates and ideas that are proposed and contested here help fashion the culture of the Australian people. Inevitably, as the site for these debates and contests, there has been some attention given to the way that the form of this building and the use of space within it helps to determine the character of the activity that takes place in and around it.

Parliamentary buildings occupy a unique place in that they simultaneously reflect and shape parts of the national culture in which they are found. Many are instantly recognisable and are seen as symbols of national identity. Images of the Palace of Westminster and the Congressional buildings in Washington are frequently used as shorthand references to the UK and the USA, as well as to the democratic and legislative processes that take place within them. The buildings used to house any nation's parliament

are frequently seen as representations of aspects of the national identity as well as working buildings. Studies that look at the relationship between the architecture of parliamentary buildings and the character of the political processes of communities regularly make this point: 'National parliamentary buildings are among the most prominent symbols of government in any polity',⁷ and (to quote from a study of the relationship between architecture and democracy):

By definition parliament buildings are expressions of the relationship between government and architecture. The buildings demonstrate faith in the cultural identity of a nation, serving two symbolic purposes simultaneously: acting as potent symbols of political power internally, that is to the people within a nation, and also providing an external example to foreigners of the confidence in that nationhood.⁸

The importance of this dual role was recognised in the briefing document prepared as part of the competition to design the permanent Parliament House in Canberra. There is a specific reference to the symbolism that the new building should have:

It should become a major national symbol, in the way that the spires of Westminster or Washington's Capitol dome have become known to people all over the world.⁹

But in building a symbol, the competing architects also had to accept some quite narrow design requirements. As well as its symbolic value and distinctive architectural identity, the new building was expected to satisfy three other key criteria. These were environmental sensitivity, functional efficiency and an engineering feasibility within a given cost. Then, the seating capacity and disposition of the two chambers was specified as was much of the detail of the accommodation of the executive within the building.

⁷ Charles Goodsell, 'The Architecture of Parliaments: Legislative Houses and Political Culture', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol 18, p. 287.

⁸ Deyan Sudjic and Helen Jones, *Architecture and Democracy*, Laurence King, London, 2001, pp. 42-3.

⁹ *Parliament House, Canberra: Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Parliament House Construction Authority, Canberra, 1979, Vol. 2, p. 15.

Inevitably, the final design produced mixed feelings. The official guides lavished it with praise and described it as 'one of the most acclaimed buildings in the world' and 'a significant architectural achievement'.¹⁰ An early architectural commentary described it as 'an elegant resolution' of the design problem and a 'triumphal result'.¹¹ Its early reception also stressed its symbolic value. So, in his opening address, the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, talked of how the design and the location 'must enhance the traditional place of Parliament in our society'.¹² Others were less kind. Tom Uren thought that the use of space – both internal and external – did not work well. Inside there was less engagement between the members, outside there was not the same 'public open space' that could be used for peaceful demonstrations' and public meetings in front of the national Parliament'.¹³ Barry Jones famously said

The atmosphere is dead: indeed I have been at crematoria that were more fun. There is no life... I suspect that the huge scale of the building... is a psychological disincentive to venturing out ... [it does not have] a good debating chamber. Members are too remote to see the whites of their opponents' eyes.¹⁴

These are criticisms from two members of the House of Representatives in 1988 who had spent much time in the old Parliament. Similar views were expressed by others who moved from the old, to work in the new building. Michelle Grattan of the

¹⁰ *Parliament House pictorial guide*, Public Relations Section, Joint House Dept., Canberra [nd], p. 1 and *Australia's Parliament House : the meeting place of our nation*, Joint House Department, Canberra, 1989, p. 6.

¹¹ Haig Beck (ed.), *Parliament House, Canberra: a building for the nation*, Collins, Sydney, 1988, p. 30.

¹² Bob Hawke, address at the opening of the new Parliament House, cited in Kerry Sibraa, 'Australia's New Parliament House', *Parliamentarian*, Vol. 69, No. 3, July 1988, p. 164.

¹³ Tom Uren, 'Introduction' in James Warden, *A Bunyip Democracy. The Parliament and Australian Political Identity*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1995, p. viii.

¹⁴ Barry Jones, *Age*, 25 October 1988, cited in Greg McIntosh, *Rounding Up the Flock? Executive Dominance and the New Parliament House*, APSA-Parliamentary Fellow Monograph, Canberra, 1989, p. 44 and James Weirick, 'Don't you believe it: critical responses to the new Parliament House', *Transition*, Summer/Autumn 1989, p. 9.

Age wrote of the way that the move to the new Parliament had a significant effect on the way that the various groups that worked within it related to each other as, for example, Ministers were more able to find 'private escape routes' to avoid the media.¹⁵ The themes that run through most of these and other criticisms are about the chambers, the location of the executive and public access to the space. It is to these aspects that I will now turn.

Debating chambers are, of course, the central part of any parliamentary building. They are the public face of the parliament and the site in which the fundamental representation of the community takes place. The broadcasting of Parliament means that together with the external view of the building itself, the two chambers – but especially that of the House of Representatives – provide the mental picture that most Australians have when they think of the Parliament. It is in the chambers that the parliamentary performance is found. The Palace of Westminster in London has been described as the 'stage upon which some of the most extraordinary events in national history have been enacted and remains ... the focus of pageant and politics: the pre-eminent "theatre of state"'.¹⁶ It is perhaps harder to make the same colourful claims about a Parliament building that is just 20 years old, but the two chambers in this building certainly carry the same symbolic roles. The importance of the theatrical aspect was acknowledged by the Parliament itself. The Joint Select Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House in 1970 argued that the chambers in the Australian Parliament were 'public theatres

¹⁵ Michelle Grattan, 'Sharing the Same Kennel: the press in Parliament House', in Julian Disney and John Nethercote (eds), *The House on Capital Hill*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1996, p. 218.

¹⁶ Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding, *The Houses of Parliament. History Art Architecture*, Merrell, London, 2000, p. 8.

where the people can witness the interplay of political forces in the legislative processes of government'.¹⁷

In the Westminster parliaments the chambers are deliberately designed for debate and to accommodate conflict. The oppositional seating arrangements assume and encourage the division of members into two distinct groups that face each other. Many students of the parliament will be familiar with the origins of this arrangement. Long before the current building at Westminster was constructed in the mid 1800s, the members of the House of Commons met first in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey, then from 1547 in St Stephen's Chapel.¹⁸ Here the seating reflected the ecclesiastic pattern of opposed benches. Charles Barry's winning design for the new Parliament replicated these same basic arrangements and this model has influenced the shaping of most of the chambers now found in parliaments through the Commonwealth.¹⁹ So entrenched and 'natural' is this arrangement of seating that the design brief to the competing architects left little room for variation. The virtues of the Australian horseshoe version of the Westminster seating plan were detailed:

All seats more or less face the chair;
Independents or parties not aligned with either Government or Opposition can be seated in a neutral position; and
A large Government majority can encroach on the opposition side of the Chamber without destroying the basic duality of the Chamber.²⁰

and all entrants were told that they 'must use the seating layouts' shown in the briefing document.²¹ After these requirements were

¹⁷ Joint Select Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House, 1970 cited in *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 29.

¹⁸ Harry Boardman, *The Glory of Parliament*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1960.

¹⁹ Albeit sometimes with a 'U-shape' turning of the benches at the end furthest from the Speaker. For a discussion of the rebuilding of Westminster after the fire of 1834 see Alexandra Wedgwood, 'The New Palace of Westminster' in Riding and Riding, *The Houses of Parliament*, p. 113-135.

²⁰ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 30.

²¹ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 30.

met, competitors were free to determine the shape of the new chambers though again, they were advised that:

the chambers are used for debates, and that a sense of intimacy is highly desirable. The Chambers should not be thought of as auditoria and the room volumes should promote an atmosphere conducive to face-to-face debates.²²

However, the fact that Barry Jones could not see the whites of his opponents' eyes suggests that face-to-face confrontation did not remain a priority.

A bigger chamber necessarily changes the mood and the dynamic of the debates. People behave differently in differently shaped space. There are many studies that show how differently configured rooms will 'induce' particular patterns of behaviour.²³ There is anecdotal evidence as well. A few weeks ago, commenting on the outcomes of the 2020 Summit, Glyn Davis acknowledged that the meetings in the more formal rooms were conducted with a different feel than those that met in less formal spaces.²⁴

Large and more open spaces tend to mean that people speak more slowly.²⁵ Smaller and more intimate rooms can lead to greater tension. Almost every writer who has discussed the importance of the size of the debating chamber has cited the speech given by Churchill (as did Glyn Davis) ahead of the reconstruction of the Commons chamber after it was destroyed by German bombing in 1941. Churchill argued that the temptation to re-build the chamber so that it was finally large enough to accommodate every member should be resisted.²⁶ What is less commonly known is that the

²² *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 30.

²³ Roger Baker, *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and methods of studying the environment of human behaviour*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968 and Paul Carter, *Repressed spaces: the poetics of agoraphobia*, Reaktion, London, 2002.

²⁴ ABC Television, 20 April 2008.

²⁵ Goodsell, 'The Architecture of Parliaments', p. 297.

²⁶ See for example, Ken Coghill and Despina Babbage, 'Seating in Legislatures', *Legislative Studies*, Vol 5 No 2, Spring 1991, pp. 15 – 22, Goodsell, 'The

limited size was a deliberately designed feature of Barry's bombed chamber. The directions given for the 1835 competition specified that the chamber should not be large enough to give every member a seat. Although there was do 'direction for how the chambers [the Lords and the Commons] should relate to each other', entrants were given clear directions that the Commons should retain its 'oppositional character' and that there should be 'seats for only 428 of the 658 members'.²⁷

In arguing against rebuilding with a larger chamber, Churchill asserted that the shape and size of the Commons was a crucial force in influencing the character of the debates that had occurred within it: 'We shape our Buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us'.²⁸ It was important for Churchill that the Parliament, and specifically the Commons, was 'a strong, easy, flexible instrument of free Debate'. He believed that the way to achieve this was an 'intimate' debating chamber with a sense of 'crowd and urgency'. A small chamber meant that the important speeches were delivered to a congested House and Ministers needed to be able to command the space and draw strength from the tension. It also meant that the great majority of debates would not be in 'the depressing atmosphere of an almost empty chamber'. Admittedly, several back-bench members were less persuaded than those on the front-bench by the merits of re-building without enough seats, but one at least one remarked on the decline in quality of debates during the

Architecture of Parliaments, pp. 287-302, Gavin Stamp "'We Shape Our Buildings and Afterwards Our Buildings Shape Us": Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and the Rebuilding of the House of Commons' in Riding and Riding, *The Houses of Parliament*, pp. 149-161 and Jenny Hutchinson, 'Setting the Scene' in Julian Disney and John Nethercote (eds), *The House on Capital Hill*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1996, pp. 1-11.

²⁷ Sudjic and Jones, *Architecture and Democracy*, pp. 69 and 74.

²⁸ Winston Churchill, *Hansard*, Commons, 28 October 1943.

time that the Commons were forced to meet in the (slightly longer) Lords chamber.²⁹

Critics of this argument point out that adversarial environments are not necessarily conducive to the best policy outcomes. Where Churchill saw merits in political tension and 'urgency', others have argued that this may lead to fruitless conflict, uncooperative and ultimately, unproductive behaviour.³⁰ Some have argued that the oppositional form suits some, but not all, members. One of the first to speak against Churchill was Nancy Astor – the first woman to take a seat in the Commons. Arguing against the lining up of government and opposition directly facing each other she said: 'I do not believe that the fights in the House of Commons helped democracy'.³¹ In making this case Astor was identifying one of the key problems with the adversarial system. It can work to disadvantage any member who does not relish, and flourish in, a conflictual environment. Marian Sawyer has usefully made the point that 'women perceive themselves as doing less well in the adversarial chamber politics characteristic of majoritarian Westminster systems'.³² She suggests that the physical organisation of the chamber – the layout of the seats with opposing parties facing each other – encourages 'masculine styles of politics'. This, in theory at least, is more likely to lead to the dominance of those who can assert their strength of will over the collective assembly. Similarly, this arrangement is unlikely to advance the diversity of voices that a truly representative chamber should accommodate. As she proposes, one solution might be to consider arranging the seating not by party allegiance but by region, with members from

²⁹ Godfrey Nicholson, *Hansard*, Commons, 28 October 1943.

³⁰ Coghill and Babbage, 'Seating in Legislatures', p. 17.

³¹ Nancy Astor, *Hansard*, Commons, 28 October 1943.

³² Marian Sawyer, 'Parliamentary Representation of Women: From Discourses of Justice to Strategies of Accountability' *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2000, p. 369.

adjoining constituencies sitting next to each other (as is the case in Sweden) or by lot (as is the case in Iceland).³³

While it is true that that a differently configured chamber – either semicircular like those in the US Congress and many European Parliaments – or a mixing of the parties, may lead to debates assuming a different character, there is little evidence that parliamentary conflict would diminish. Indeed, it is notable that those parliaments where the tension builds to the point of direct physical confrontation tend to be the so-called ‘consensual’ or ‘non-adversarial’ chambers. Any search for examples of debates that have broken down and led to violence, in fact shows that they are much less frequently found in Westminster style oppositional chambers than they are in semi-circular ones.³⁴ Some of this might be accounted for by the fact that managed and ritualised conflict is part of the design of the Westminster system. By institutionalising and accommodating conflict in the seating and the oppositional form, the chance of ‘unmanaged’ and more physical conflict is diminished. Part of it, of course, also reflects the very different political practices that operate in different parliaments and the diverse political parties and representatives that varied electoral systems generate.

More generally, there is an intrinsic strength in the adversarial system. We should not lose sight of the fact that debate – the contesting of ideas – is vital if a democracy is to stay strong. If I turn again to Milton, in an essay against censorship he wrote:

out of many moderat / varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes
that are not vastly / disproportionall arises the goodly and the

³³ Sawyer, ‘Parliamentary Representation of Women’, p. 369-70.

³⁴ Clement Macintyre, ‘Designing Debate: the implications of parliamentary architecture’, *Legislative Studies*, Vol 12, No. 1, 1997, p. 46-7.

gracefull / symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure.³⁵

A similar architectural metaphor is used by a contemporary of Milton's, Andrew Marvell. In a poem reflecting upon the achievements of Cromwell's 'attempts to establish constitutional order',³⁶ he sees oppositional debate as necessary to give the outcome strength. He wrote:

While the resistance of opposed Minds,
The Fabrick as with Arches stronger binds³⁷

In other words, the dynamic of debate is important. Policies that have weathered testing and challenge by spirited opposition are likely to be better refined and better developed and – like Marvell's arches – more likely to hold up. The challenge is determining the best space and best arrangements within that space to promote productive debate. I will leave it to those who have sat as Members in this Parliament to say whether or not the chambers are too large – but to my eye, even during the major set piece announcements when the chambers are full – there is not the same air of close engagement and productive tension that can be found in more crowded assemblies.

So we can see that in the Australian parliamentary model there is some friction between the belief that the arrangement of space produces a dynamic exchange of ideas, and the idea that this very arrangement may diminish the expression of a broad representation of views. There is, I think, a further tension built into the structure

³⁵ John Milton, "Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England". *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1953-1982, Volume 2, page lines 11-14.

³⁶ David Aers and Gunther Kress, 'Historical Process and Individuals in *Areopagitica*', in David Aers, Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress (eds), *Literature, Language and Society in England 1580-1680*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1981, p. 173.

³⁷ Andrew Marvell, *First Anniversary of the Government under his Highness the Lord Protector*, lines 96, 97. *The Complete Poems*, Elizabeth Story Donno (ed), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 129.

of this Parliament. That is the co-location of the executive and the legislature. The nature of the changing relationship between executive and parliaments is one of the perennial topics of investigation by political scientists in Australia.³⁸ As with governments in Europe and North America, the Australian story is one of growing executive power at the expense of the parliament.³⁹ This is a result of several factors.⁴⁰ Principal among these is the scale and scope of policy matters that governments now routinely deal with. A study conducted among MPs and Parliamentary officials in the late 1980s showed that 75% of the MPs and 70% of the officials interviewed either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the proposition that 'increasing complexity ... made it harder for the Parliament to check the Executive'.⁴¹ Moreover, any examination of the responsibilities assumed by governments over time shows an extraordinary and consistent increase in the number of executive decisions and legislative initiatives.⁴² Commentaries from more than 25 years ago drew attention to the diminished time that Parliament had to consider Bills in detail, and there can be no question that time is more pressured now than it was in the early 1980s.⁴³

Added to this very considerable growth in the complexity of policy issues, we have seen a growth in the volume of data that informs and influences policy making, and a much more substantial (frequently international) policy focus required by government. One

³⁸ For a good overview of the history of the relationship see Jim Chalmers and Glyn Davis, 'Power: Relations between the Parliament and the Executive', Parliamentary Library Research Paper 14, 2000-01.

³⁹ Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (eds), *The presidentialization of politics: a comparative study of modern democracies*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴⁰ See Michael Keating and Pat Weller, 'Cabinet Government: An Institution Under Pressure', in Michael Keating, John Wanna and Pat Weller (eds), *Institutions on the Edge? Capacity for Governance*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 2000.

⁴¹ McIntosh, *Rounding Up the Flock?*, pp. 34-36. Members of the media were more forthright: 79% of them strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition.

⁴² Gordon Reid and Martyn Forrest, *Australia's Commonwealth Parliament 1901-1988 : ten perspectives*, MUP, Carlton, 1989.

⁴³ Gordon Reid, 'The parliamentary contribution to law making', *Politics*, Vol 15 No. 1, 1980, pp. 40-41.

last key factor that must also be recognised is the way that the media, especially the electronic media, tends to focus principally on the Prime Minister and, to a lesser extent, on a narrow range of Ministers, rather than on the parliamentary processes that endorse or refine legislative initiatives. All these factors – with others (I haven't for example, touched at all on the role of parties) – have meant that the Australian political process has been subject to similar forms of concentration to those seen elsewhere. The executive is able to operate from a position of strength and dominance, and is frequently able to prevail over the legislature and so limit the capacities of the legislature to undertake its classic roles of scrutiny and the maintenance of government accountability.

Then, in Australia, there is one further factor that reinforces the power of the executive. This is the fact that, by deliberate design, the key executive offices are located in the same building as the legislature. This arrangement seems to be a peculiarly Australian practice. Or more accurately, a peculiarly Commonwealth Government practice, as the States maintain separate sites for their Parliaments and executive offices. The account that is generally given for the co-location of the executive and the Parliament is that there was no alternative when the Federal Parliament re-located from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927.⁴⁴ The administrative centres of the Federal Departments remained in Melbourne for some time and the Prime Minister and Ministers found space in the provisional Parliament House – and then just remained there. This accounts for how and why the executive originally found itself working in the Parliamentary buildings, but it does not really explain why they remained there for the following 61 years or why they were given their own discrete accommodation in the new Parliament.

⁴⁴ Terry Fewtrell, 'Parliamentary Order', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol 44, No 4 December 1985, p. 324, McIntosh, *Rounding Up the Flock?*, p. 17, and Weirick, 'Don't you believe it', p. 44.

There is no simple answer to these questions. Cost would have been a major disincentive in the years before the Second World War. Then, it may well be that inertia and different priorities combined to discourage the construction of a separate executive building as Canberra grew in the post war years. However, for whatever reason, there seems to have been minimal debate about using the opportunity offered by the building of the new Parliament to find a new location for the executive offices. The various Parliamentary Committees that considered the new Parliament seem to have operated on the assumption that a larger space for Ministerial offices would naturally form part of the new building.⁴⁵ Perhaps it was simply the case that after so long

A political and bureaucratic culture had emerged which resisted the resumption of [a] normal ministerial presence amongst Federal bureaucrats.⁴⁶

By the time the design briefs went to the competing architects, the co-location of the executive and the legislature had been turned into a virtue and the claimed 'advantages' of this arrangement were listed. In essence, these were saving time on travel and ease of communication between Ministers and between Ministers and other Parliamentarians.⁴⁷ So, the executive 'element' of the proposed new Parliament was explicitly defined and had to meet narrow and clear criteria. Chief among those was the need for separation and security. There are echoes here of Milton's 'close recess and secret conclave'.⁴⁸

The competing architects were told that 'Security is of paramount importance', that the 'Executive Government element should be a clearly defined zone', and that connections with other

⁴⁵ See for example, letter from Edward St. John (Member for Warringah) to The Joint Select Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House, 12 September 1968.

⁴⁶ Weirick, 'Don't you believe it', p. 34.

⁴⁷ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 1, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 775.

parts of the building should be kept to a minimum.⁴⁹ The area had to be 'secure and self contained', but not 'isolated' as the 'interaction patterns of Ministers and staff preclude that'. There was to be secure entry to this area from the rest of the Parliamentary building, but there was also to be a 'private entrance for the sole use of Ministers' with 'direct and secure access to their vehicles in a location away from public areas'.⁵⁰ The schematic diagram that accompanied the written brief had the main public foyer of the Parliament at the furthest point from the executive and showed a 'very low' expected pattern of usage or traffic. The next closest to the fringe were the Senators and Members with low traffic anticipated. The area placed closest to the executive and expected to produce the highest volume of traffic was 'Refreshments'.⁵¹

Now there can be no argument that security was of growing importance in the late 1970s – the Hilton Hotel bombing in Sydney had occurred in February 1978 – and the design brief was in some ways quite prescient in its anticipation of this as a priority. Yet the stress placed upon it suggests an obvious problem with the assumptions underpinning the conception of the new building. If security was paramount, if it was vital that Ministers should have a secure and private car entrance that was remote from public and media gaze, why were they being housed in what is – or what should be – a public building? We know from the design brief that Ministers' suites were expected to be no more than two minutes from the chambers.⁵² This, of course means that Ministers could be working at their desk and be available for divisions. However, appearances in the chambers constitute a relatively minor part of a Minister's life. To take just the House of Representatives, the

⁴⁹ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 65.

⁵⁰ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 66.

⁵¹ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 65.

⁵² Beck, *Parliament House*, p. 158.

number of sitting days when Ministers need to be physically in the building averages somewhere between 65-75 a year. In comparison to other parliaments, this is a low number. The average number of sitting days per year for the Commons in the 26 years before 2004-05 was 160 (and peaked at 244 in one year) yet Ministers seem able to balance their legislative duties at Westminster with their departmental duties elsewhere in Whitehall.⁵³

Many of the problems of co-location have been covered by others. Before the building was complete, Terry Fewtrell had argued that the accommodation of the executive in its own discrete wing of the new building reflected 'the strength of the Executive *vis-à-vis* the Parliament in recent times'.⁵⁴ Further, he feared that the concentration of the power of the executive would be increased when all the Ministers were concentrated into a single area, rather than being spread through the building as had been the case in the Provisional Parliament.⁵⁵ In his study of the relationship between the executive and the Parliament, Greg McIntosh cited Fewtrell's work and numerous other commentators – a mixture of MPs and external observers – who all expressed concerns about the retreat of the executive to a 'citadel' in which they would be less accessible to backbench MPs during their time in the Parliamentary buildings.⁵⁶ Significantly, several commented that it was not just the formal access that was diminished, but the fact that casual meetings in the corridors became less frequent meant that there was a reduced interaction and exchange of ideas. This was also a problem for the media. McIntosh's study shows that 61% of MPs agreed that face to face communication had become harder while 94% of those

⁵³ House of Commons Sittings since 1979, <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snsg-02226.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Fewtrell, 'Parliamentary Order', p. 325.

⁵⁵ Fewtrell, 'Parliamentary Order', pp. 325-6. However, see also Fewtrell, 'Welcome to Our House', *Canberra Times*, 9 May 2008, in which he is less concerned about the location of the executive.

⁵⁶ McIntosh, *Rounding Up the Flock?*, pp. 18-9.

interviewed from the Press Gallery agreed.⁵⁷ As we have already seen, Michelle Grattan was one who made similar criticisms.⁵⁸

The lament by many who had worked in the provisional Parliament that it was no longer possible to bump into Ministers while passing through King's Hall or while having a coffee, is a recurrent theme. The importance of this was recognised in the design brief that called for the maintenance of the easy communication between Members and Ministers. However, the brief also recognised – as unfortunately we must today – that security is of prime importance, and specified that a secure site for the executive was essential. These competing requirements led to an unfortunate outcome. We now have the executive in a discrete wing within the Parliament House. This means that Senators and Members are unlikely to pass through this section while going about their normal daily activities and the 'casual' access of the media to Ministers is restricted. Surely a better solution would have been to acknowledge the reality of the separation and to physically divide the legislature from the executive. This would mean that Ministers spent most of their working days in their Departments (and would possibly foster greater levels of Ministerial responsibility). Then, on those days that the Parliament was sitting, Ministers could work from offices distributed through the secure parts of the building and engage more readily with other Parliamentarians and the media.

If the Parliament was the site of just the legislature and not also the home of the executive, then I think it would be different place. Having the legislature and the executive housed in their own buildings would allow each to function in a way less inhibited by the presence of the other. If this building was unambiguously the place of the elected representatives of the people rather than being

⁵⁷ McIntosh, *Rounding Up the Flock?*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ See note 16 above.

simultaneously the symbol of the government then visitors, elected members, and those who work here in other capacities would view the building in a different light. While I cannot quantify this in any measurable way, it is self-evident that the perceptions of a place change the way that it is used and the way that occupants engage within it.

I have already commented on the lack of casual interaction that was once a feature of a central space such as King's Hall in the old Parliament. All the anecdotal reports that I have received is that the equivalent space in this building – Members' Hall – does not work in the same way. Like King's Hall in the old Parliament, Members' Hall in this building is the link between the two chambers, but there are two key differences. Firstly, Members' Hall is not the same pivot point that King's Hall was in the old Parliament. When it is used by Members and Senators, it is as a thoroughfare rather than as a meeting place. Secondly, there is no access for the general public. This means that there is not the same sense of energy and bustle as was the case in the old Parliament. Anyone who had the chance to stand in the middle of King's Hall and watch the interaction of the Ministers, Members, press and public while the Parliament sat in that building will see a stark contrast with the level of engagement that takes place in Members' Hall here. The architects intended this central space to be a place where reflection and informal discussion would occur: 'the literal and symbolic meeting place between the two Houses'.⁵⁹ The pool of water reflecting the movement of the clouds and the flag above was intended to connect the Members with the outside world. But there must be better ways to get the outside world into the Parliament. This is, I think, one of the unresolved problems. The scale of the building and the number of people working in it mean that the building has assumed some

⁵⁹ Beck, *Parliament House*, p. 122.

aspects of an insular and enclosed community. This should not be a surprise, as it was clear from the start that this would be in issue. The brief that guided the architects made reference to the building operating with some of the resources of a small self-contained community and, as commentators have pointed out, the building and its working population is bigger than a small town.⁶⁰

Of course some of this could not be resolved by the architects. The decision to place the building on top of Capital Hill meant that the Parliament would always be remote from its own community. It is not easy to step outside the Parliament and mix with the workers and residents of the city here in the way that it is in most of the Australian State and Territory Parliaments.⁶¹ The building is not physically adjacent to a commercial or residential centre. It is designed to be approached by car. That means that most people who work here arrive by car and enter directly from the car park. Visitors who come by car similarly have the rather drab concrete interior of the car park as their first impression. In fact, the building is best approached by a walk up Federation Mall from the back of the Old Parliament, but this is scarcely practical for most visitors. The relative isolation of the building means that crowds are less likely to gather spontaneously than in other public places. Having said that, one of the joys of the building is the way in which those who are on foot can choose to ignore the entrance and keep going so that they are walking across (at least part of) the roof of the building. This sense of the people being above the representatives was one of the key conceptual features of the architects and, even now with limited access, it still works – albeit that there have been

⁶⁰ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 1, p. 19 and Beck, *Parliament House*, p. 21.

⁶¹ Though one notable exception to this is the Western Australian Parliament which is separated from Perth by a major cutting holding a busy freeway.

times when even this is denied because of the ever-present security concerns.

Those visitors who do enter do not, in fact, get to see all that much of the building. It is true that they are certainly likely to be impressed by the foyer and the Great Hall. The scale and finish of these rooms are designed to impress. In Milton's *Pandemonium* it was the 'porches wide, but chief the spacious hall' that reduced the occupants to the scale of bees as they swarmed within it.⁶² In the public spaces of this building people similarly bustle about as though bees in clusters. Visitors can then enter the galleries of the chambers and they can peer over the balcony at the (generally deserted) Members' Hall. However, not much more than this is on open access. I accept that the world has changed and that appropriate security measures in places such as this are needed but applying a *cordon sanitaire* to all other areas does nothing to promote the healthy engagement between the citizens and their elected members in this the most symbolic of political spaces. Isolation is not good for democracy.

So, to conclude: parliaments and parliamentary buildings are more than just institutions and places where elected representatives meet and consider legislation. They have a symbolic role as the theatre of state, and the buildings themselves often come to represent or reinforce ideas of national identity.⁶³ This means that in taking stock of this building over its first 20 years we need to consider not just how well it works as a modern and efficient parliamentary space, but also how well it represents the character of Australian democratic traditions. There can be no argument that the increased space and improved facilities means that it should be a more productive work environment than the old parliament.

⁶² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, i 762.

⁶³ Sudjic and Jones, *Architecture and Democracy*, p. 42.

Whether we can be as clear about the more theatrical or symbolic roles is less evident.

In this talk I have considered the way that the space in the chambers works and whether it encourages or acts against productive debates, I have considered the implications of siting the executive in the same building as the legislature, as well as the effect of limited public access. Clearly, these are not things that can be – or, more accurately – will be changed. The chambers will not be re-designed, the executive will not be moved and security concerns will not disappear. Given this, what can be done? I will finish by suggesting some of the goals that possible reforms should be aimed towards. And I do so, not pretending that these will resolve my concerns, but perhaps hoping to spark some debate or further consideration of these issues.

Firstly, some effort should be directed towards enhancing the independence of the House of Representatives and, to a lesser extent, the Senate (lesser for the Senate because it already has a greater level of independence). Breaking the dominance of the parties has been the dream, albeit forlorn and unrealised, of many academic critics. It is unrealised largely because the adoption of reforms depends upon the support of the parties and, not surprisingly, they take a bit of convincing. However, such initiatives as a more formally independent Speaker, distribution of the Chairs of Committees more evenly, Parliament's control of an independent budget, better resources for back-bench and non-government Members are all obvious steps forward for any parliament. Similarly, electoral reform for the House would generate a more representative range of voices. One way or another, the more that the elected representatives feel capable of resisting the dominance of the executive, then the more the Parliament will be able to

genuinely reflect the 'interplay of political forces in the legislative processes of government'.⁶⁴

Similarly, if re-locating the executive to a new building is not feasible, then some effort should be made to increase the informal interaction between Ministers and other Parliamentarians during sitting times. Perhaps a redistribution of the space so that there is a better mix of offices would allow for the casual encounters that were a feature of the old Parliament without threatening the security of any Member. This might mean that some Ministers find it harder to avoid the media – but I don't see this to be a particular problem.

Lastly, how can this 'people's house' be made more accessible to the public without compromising the security requirements? This has both symbolic and physical dimensions. If the Parliament – that is the elected representatives – can demonstrate their independence from the executive, if there is a greater sense of engagement and open debate, if the executive is less remote in its 'secret conclave' then I think that the Parliament may be seen to be more unambiguously an open and accessible place to consider what Milton called our 'state affairs'. If even some of this can be achieved, then the community may well feel more engaged and able to feel that they are part of our 'theatre of state'.

⁶⁴ *Conditions for a Two-Stage Competition*, Vol. 2, p. 29.