



# Home and Away

Travel with work is often seen as a benefit, but it's not always what it's made out to be. For many Australians who must regularly travel interstate or overseas with their jobs, the pressures of separation from family can make life difficult—for them and their families. There is added pressure when it means being separated from young children. Peter Cotton finds out that members of the House of Representatives face the same dilemmas—and how that can help them to be better representatives.

Federal parliamentarian Christopher Pyne says he would be happy and proud if one or more of his three children decided to become politicians, but he doubts it'll ever happen.

"Experience tells us that the children of politicians don't usually follow their parents into parliament," says Mr Pyne, the Member for Sturt. "That probably tells us something about how hard the children of parliamentarians find the separation from their parent who is a politician."

And it's not only the children who find the separation difficult. Christopher Pyne feels a profound wrench when he leaves his young family at home in Adelaide to attend parliamentary sittings. His wife Carolyn recently gave birth to baby Felix, and the Pynes have a set of two-year-old twins, Eleanor and Barnaby.

"I find it very difficult to leave home these days," says Mr Pyne. "I feel very sad and I miss my family a lot when I'm in Canberra and I'm full of joy when I go home. There's nothing more exciting than arriving back in Adelaide on Friday morning and having these completely loving children wanting to grab you and give you a big hug. It's a really wonderful experience to be so loved without any artifice."

Federal parliament sits an average 20 weeks a year and members of the House of Representatives are also required to travel for committee hearings around the country.

While some people might regard the travel required of parliamentarians as one of the perks of their job, members who have young families find it particularly difficult because it means extended periods away from home.

Tanya Plibersek's voice quavers as she talks about leaving 20-month-old daughter Anna at home to attend parliamentary sittings in Canberra.

"I feel sad and I miss my baby when I'm away from her," says Ms Plibersek, the Member for Sydney. "If I had to work the hours I do, and I had to be away from home as much as I am and I was a corporate lawyer or something, I just wouldn't do it. But I feel that as a member of parliament I can sometimes make people's lives better. It's the only thing that makes the time away from home tolerable."

According to Christopher Pyne, the pressures that come with having a young family have made him a better parliamentarian. "It's good to experience all the things that people in my electorate go through in terms of demands on their time, balancing work and family, financial pressures, mortgages.

It's one of the things the electorate appreciates about members of parliament, that they do understand and go through the things that everyone else does."

Tanya Plibersek agrees. "All families have to deal with the stress of balancing work and family, and while my time away is unusual, other families have different stresses," she says. "Other people don't have the control over their timetables that I do. Others are worried about losing their jobs. All families have things to deal with. The parliament needs people with all sorts of life experiences and, being a parent with a young family, I know some of those pressures first hand."

Tanya Plibersek has cut back on some work commitments to spend more time with 20-month-old Anna. "I shouldn't really confess to this but when I'm in Sydney," she says, "I sneak away from the office early and go and pick her up from childcare and we'll go to a park or the beach for some daytime play. That way we're not always seeing each other at the end of a long day."

Ms Plibersek has also changed the way she schedules her weeks in Canberra since Anna's arrival. "I used to leave for Canberra on a Sunday night," she says. "I now go on

*Above: Member for Sydney, Tanya Plibersek, with daughter Anna.  
Photo: AUSPIC*

**"All families have to deal with the stress of balancing work and family, and while my time away is unusual, other families have different stresses."**

*Continued on page 20*

Monday mornings during the sitting week and in winter take my chances with the fog.

"And whereas I used to stay at the Canberra office till Friday to try and catch up on administrative work, now I'm out the door as soon as I can on Thursday night so I can be there when she wakes up on Friday morning.

"Before I had Anna, I'd get into my Sydney office each morning at 7.30am or 8am and stay there till 7pm and go straight to whatever function I had that night. I'd get home at 10pm or 11pm most nights. Now, whenever I can, I pick her up from childcare as early as I can and have a little play, give her dinner and a bath and then go back to work or to that night's function. I'm lucky that she goes to bed nice and early."

Says Ms Plibersek: "This is the sort of job where you can fill every hour of the day and never leave the office and never be at home unless you make a special effort to get away.

"I'm very lucky that my husband Michael does his share, and sometimes more than his share, in looking after our daughter and we're both lucky that we have my parents and his mother who help us enormously because I don't know how anyone manages without family support."

Since the arrival of their twins, Christopher and Carolyn Pyne have declared Saturday family day. "Unless there are extenuating circumstances, it's the day we spend together," says Mr Pyne.

"We think that in order to have a successful political career you must have a successful family life and so sacrifices have to be made with time that you would normally devote to the electorate. I'm sure the electorate would think that was reasonable."

The Pynes have bought speaker phones for their Adelaide home and plan to get a video link for the home computer.

"I ring home as often as I can during the day," says Mr Pyne. "Sometimes that means five or six calls. I talk to the children and they hear me on the speaker phone talking to Carolyn. I don't make too big a thing of those calls. We just have short conversations through the day and it gives the children the feeling that it's easy to ring me at any time. I don't want my children to ever think they can't call me."

Christopher Pyne says that despite the fact that his life as a politician means he gets to spend less time with his young family, he has no regrets about his choice of career. "Politics is a noble profession," he says, "and I think it's a great opportunity and a gift to be able to be a member of parliament and to represent people and try and improve their lives."



The Member for Chisholm, Anna Burke, says she pines for her three-year-old daughter Madeline when they're separated for days on end. "Like any parent, I find it awful," says Ms Burke. "We talk on the phone two or three times a day when I'm away, but I'm finding the separation harder as she gets older."

Ms Burke also has a baby, five-month-old John, who she still breast feeds and who travels with her. She's feeding John in her Parliament House office during the phone interview with *About the House*.

Anna Burke sets aside Friday as the day she spends with the children. She says the travel she's required to do as a politician brings strains and complications to her family life, but no more than any other working family.

"It means I appreciate what it's like to juggle work and family responsibilities," says Ms Burke. "And it's easier for us than it is for a lot of people because my salary gives us buying power which allows us to get a housekeeper and pay for child care. I also have great family support."

The Member for Lindsay, Jackie Kelly, gave up her job as Minister for Sport and Tourism because she found it too difficult to balance the demands of the job with the needs of her young family.

"There were enormous amounts of travel associated with being a minister," says Ms Kelly. "There were the late nights with industry groups and electorate functions. Also, as a high profile female in the party,

I was in enormous demand around the country for fund-raising."

Jackie Kelly and husband Gary have two children: two-year-old Dominique and five-month-old Lachlan. "I have an enormous amount of time with Lachlan which I didn't have with Domi," says Ms Kelly. "It's been a lot of fun and a lot more relaxed. The more time you spend with your children the more little things you notice about them. You build up all these little anecdotes and memories and the 'kid things' that you don't experience if you're working."

Ms Kelly sometimes brings a child carer and one or both of her children to Canberra for sitting weeks. At other times both Lachlan and Dominique stay in Sydney with Gary.

Ms Kelly believes her time away from her children has no lasting impact on them. "Kids are highly adaptable," she says. "If they've got one parent with them they'll soldier on and it's great when they get to an age where you can talk to them on the phone. When I ring Dominique, she always asks me to come back home and I say 'I can't. I'm working.' and then she settles and talks about what she's done during the day."

Ms Kelly hopes to rejoin the ministry in the not-too-distant future. "I'm hopeful that the career will be there when my kids are older and off to school and doing their own thing," she says. ■

Peter Cotton is a freelance journalist from Canberra. Illustration: Pat Campbell