



Graham Edwards



Chris Pearce



Janice Crosio



Kay Hull



Alby Shultz



Dick Adams



Martyn Evans



# GRASS ROOTS

For many members of the House of Representatives, a seat in federal parliament is not their first involvement in Australian politics. Peter Cotton talks to members who started out in local government and finds out how grass roots politics has helped them get where they are today.

Just under a quarter of the members of the House of Representatives have been either local government councillors or have served time in state politics.

While members who have served on council or in a state parliament say it assisted their progress into federal politics, they don't see it as a prerequisite. But clearly, it helps.

For starters, representing a council ward or a state seat boosts a person's profile with voters and with the party members who pre-select candidates for federal seats. It also helps to build networks and fine tune

political skills, and gives people a clearer perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of Australia's three-tiered system of government.

And while some members of the House describe their time in local or state government as frustrating, most say that the experience has helped them operate more effectively as a federal parliamentarian.

Seven years on the Wagga Wagga City Council taught the Member for Riverina, Kay Hull, how to make an unpopular political decision.

"You soon learn on council that you can't please everyone all of the time," she says. "It trains you to make objective decisions based on evidence, rather than go with what's fashionable or popular, particularly when you've got to withstand pressure from neighbours or people you work with, or see every day—people you meet in the shopping centre."

Mrs Hull says the Wagga City Council's meeting procedures are the same as those used in the federal parliament. "That allowed me to hit the ground running in this place from day one. I made a seamless transition," she says.

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Martyn Evans

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The Member for Prospect, Janice Crosio, says her experience in local government taught her both how to run a good office, and the need to get out and hear the concerns of people.

Ms Crosio served nine years on the Fairfield City Council in Western Sydney, four of them as mayor, before being elected to the New South Wales state parliament in 1981. She was the state's first woman minister, taking on the natural resources portfolio in 1984. Ms Crosio was elected to the House of Representatives in 1990 and is Chief Opposition Whip.

"Serving in the three tiers of government gives you an appreciation of how they're interwoven," says Ms Crosio, "but also how they can assert themselves when they want to."

From 1997 until 2000, the Member for Aston, Chris Pearce, served on the Knox City Council in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Mr Pearce says his experience on council was very frustrating and not something he would want to repeat.

"There's a lot of talking that goes on in local government, but not a lot of doing," he says. "My three years in local government were the most political experience I've ever had, but a lot of the politics was personal politics, and very raw."

"At a local council meeting, 90 per cent of what you deal with either makes sense or it doesn't. You're dealing with issues that, in the end, are common sense and there's not a lot of room for philosophical disagreement. In the federal parliament, we argue about the nation's long term interests. There's a lot of accountability and we get on and do things."

In 1981, the Member for Cowan, Graham Edwards, was secretary of a rate payers group in Perth's northern suburbs. Frustrated with the time it took Stirling City Council to make improvements in his area, Mr Edwards stood for the council and was elected. "You have a lot of influence as one of 13 councillors," he says. "You have a say in the budget and how it's spent in your ward, so you can achieve a lot."

Mr Edwards was elected to the Western Australian parliament in 1983 and served seven years as a minister for everything from police and emergency services, to consumer and youth affairs.

"It can be pretty hard as a backbencher in a state parliament trying to influence outcomes," says Mr Edwards. "Even as a minister, there are lots of competing interests, but at least ministers have control over a budget and priority-setting. Unless of course you're the Minister for Police, a portfolio where the budget is jealously guarded by the Commissioner for Police."

Mr Edwards says that as an opposition backbencher in the federal parliament, it's very difficult to influence outcomes, particularly those relating to the budget. "It sometimes gets to the point that if you lobby in the parliament on behalf of a particular group, you give them and their cause the kiss of death, and that's very unfortunate."

According to the Member for Lyons, Dick Adams, time as a state member of parliament taught him how to deal with constituents and how to set priorities. "It also teaches you how to sponsor change and how to get your ideas up," he says.



Janice Crosio

Mr Adams was a Member for Franklin in the Tasmanian House of Assembly for four years until 1982. He was elected to the federal seat of Lyons in 1993.

The Member for Bonython, Martyn Evans, says that while it's a good thing that some federal parliamentarians have served in local or state government, it's not necessary to have experience in other tiers of government to be an effective member of the House.

"If everyone had to go through that progression," says Mr Evans, "only professional politicians would get here and that wouldn't be desirable. The federal parliament should draw on people from all walks of life."

Mr Evans was a year old in 1954 when his parents emigrated from the United Kingdom. The Evans family settled in the South Australian city of Elizabeth and 19 years

later, in 1975, young Martyn was elected to the Elizabeth City Council. His ten years on council included five as mayor.

He had another ten-year stint, from 1984, as the Member for Elizabeth in the South Australian parliament, before winning a by-election for the federal seat of Bonython, a seat which takes in his old state electorate of Elizabeth.

Mr Evans says the major difference in operating between the three tiers of government is the timeframe in which you can get things done. "When you're the mayor and you think something needs changing, you can achieve it within weeks, or at the most a couple of months," he says. "When you want to do the same as a state member, you can bring about legislative change within months or at the most a year. But it takes years to get change as a federal member."



Alby Schultz

"As you move through the tiers of government, your timeframe expands and you add zeros to the budgetary numbers required for change. It's an adjustment you've got to make. If, as a federal parliamentarian, you're frustrated because you can't change things tomorrow, you've got the wrong perspective."

Kay Hull agrees with Martyn Evans that election to a local or state legislature is not a necessary stepping stone for someone aspiring to become a federal politician. "A lot of people in local government are not interested in a political career," says Mrs Hull. "I didn't go into local government thinking I'd move into a political life. I was probably the most apolitical person you'd meet."

"But I really took to the process. I became immersed and realised I had to be vocal and that being vocal was not always popular."

In 1983, when Alby Schultz complained to the Cootamundra Shire Council about a local issue of concern to him, he was told there was a vacancy coming up on council and that if he felt so strongly, he should put himself up as a candidate.

Mr Schultz took the advice, won the election and served on Cootamundra

Council for eight years. In March 1988, while still on the council, he was elected to the seat of Burrinjuck in the New South Wales state parliament. In 1998, he was elected to the House of Representatives for the New South Wales electorate of Hume.

Mr Schultz describes himself as a community-based politician. He says his time on the Cootamundra Shire Council was the key to his political future. "It took me to the coal face of what I wanted to do and that was to represent people at the local level," he says. "The main difference between operating in the state and federal spheres is that state seats are about half the size of federal seats and you have about half the number of constituents to service. But you do it under the same conditions and you get the same money."

When Graham Edwards retired from the Western Australian parliament in 1997 after 14 years, he says he wanted to get as far away from politics as he could.

"But it didn't take long before I realised that there's only a certain amount of fishing you can do and only a certain number of books you can read without getting bored," says Mr Edwards. "Having lived a very busy life for a long time, I started to do things again at a grass roots level in my community."



Chris Pearce

Then came the Hanson phenomenon, which Mr Edwards says motivated him to get back into political harness. "The rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation made me worry that Australia was drifting in the wrong direction without any real checks," he says.

After less than a year out of politics, Graham Edwards won a bitter pre-selection battle for the Perth seat of Cowan and was soon on his way to Canberra.

He says his choice of a life in politics was motivated by more than external political factors. "Having come home from Vietnam without my legs, I wanted to prove to myself and others that I was normal," says Mr Edwards. "My disabilities are very moderate compared to a lot of other people and I've never seen myself as a good example of a person with a disability."

Members of the House who have also served in state and local government are ideally placed to comment on one of the enduring debates in Australian politics, the on-going argument over whether Australia is over-governed.

Graham Edwards believes Australia is over-governed and says we'd be better off without state governments and with a reduced number of federal parliamentarians.

"I think we're hard pressed justifying the number of members and senators we have," he says. "If you had a good hard look at it, you could cut back on the number of elected representatives right across Australia."

The Member for Aston, Chris Pearce agrees that Australia is over-governed. "There's a lot of duplication at a state level," he says. "There are seven different education systems and if you move interstate, you have to reapply for your driver's licence and re-register your car. It's lazy and there are lots of efficiencies that could be achieved if we had a thorough look at it.

"But if you cut into the states' responsibilities to produce efficiencies, local government would have to become that much more accountable," says Mr Pearce. "Councils now are like boards of directors. The day-to-day running of the place is in the hands of council officers and there are monthly meetings of council which are really a ratification process."

Mr Pearce says that for these reasons, he believes it's easy to overplay the notion that local government is a training ground for the state and federal spheres. "After some time in the federal parliament," he says, "it's clear to me that federal MPs are in a different stratosphere to local government councillors. Things here are a bit more esoteric and cerebral."

The Member for Lyons, Dick Adams, is another who believes Australia is over-governed, especially when it comes to duplication in the way the three tiers of government deliver services and build infrastructure.

"The nation can no longer afford duplication when it comes to infrastructure," says Mr Adams. "But there's also the duplication when governments do things for party political reasons, to win an election. We need better planning on what infrastructure to build. There's got to be a need, and we shouldn't build something to win a seat somewhere."

Martyn Evans rejects the notion that Australia is over-governed and says elimination of the states does not make economic sense. "The cost of running state parliaments is trivial compared with the cost of the services they deliver," he says. "The parliament of South Australia probably costs about \$10 million a year but it delivers about \$10 billion worth of services.

"The Commonwealth Minister for Health is much less accessible and much less accountable than his state counterpart. You can tie down a state minister and hold him accountable in the press or in the parliament, or even in the supermarket on a Saturday morning. It's something that's quite important and will grow more important with time, not less."

While she agrees that Australia is over-governed, Janice Crosio says those who advocate the abolition of the states are not being practical. "I don't see how it could happen," she says. "I don't see who would give the impetus to it, unless you had some dictator in there saying this is the way it's going to go, because I don't think any of the states are going to give their power away.

"It's easy for federal parliamentarians to criticise the states and say they're redundant, but if you talk to your constituents, most of them are more concerned about the pothole in the road and their kids' education than what's happening at Pine Gap."

However, Ms Crosio believes there's an argument for reducing the number of local government authorities across Australia. "When I drive the 30 kilometres from my home in Fairfield into Sydney city, I pass through about 18 local government areas. You just don't need all those structures. But talk to the councillors and every one of them thinks they do a very good job. Even so, I think they could do with a bit of amalgamation."

In 1975 when she was Mayor of Fairfield, Janice Crosio made a pledge to herself that if she ever got to be the state Minister for Local Government she'd re-write the act. "The New South Wales Local Government Act was impossible to understand," she says. "I moved into state parliament and eventually became the minister, re-wrote the act and councils are now working under that act. I feel very proud when I see something change for the better, something that wouldn't have changed without me." ■

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Kay Hill