





# Plain speaking

After six years in the hot seat, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Neil Andrew, reflects on the challenges and highlights of his job as the House's referee.

Story: Georgie Oakeshott Photos: AUSPIC

**A**s Speaker Neil Andrew contemplates hanging up his robes for the last time, he is satisfied he's leaving the parliament a more dignified and civil place. He certainly has no plans to drop dead in the House of Representatives chamber muttering "dreadful, dreadful" like Australia's first Speaker.

Apparently Speaker Holder's last words reflected his disgust at the behaviour of his political colleagues. Speaker Andrew says standards have improved since then and today's critics don't know their history.

"Many people who are critical of parliament haven't looked very closely at Hansard over the past 100 years where there have been some very colourful, sometimes confrontational exchanges," he says. "One hundred years ago this nation was the envy of most of the world, 100 years later it still is. It doesn't mean it can't be improved, or refined, but it has changed with the times. It's an evolving parliament and I enjoy talking to Australians about it."

Standing down at the next election after six years as Speaker and 21 years representing the South Australian seat of Wakefield, Neil Andrew is a champion promoter of the good work of parliament. As spokesperson for the House of Representatives, Speaker Andrew has thrown his support behind initiatives which spread a positive message.

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*The House's representative: Clockwise from top left, Speaker Neil Andrew at the Centenary of Federation celebrations in Melbourne in 2001; commemorating the victims of the Bali tragedy in 2002; in procession into the House of Representatives chamber in 2004; with US President George Bush at the signing of the Parliament House visitor's book in 2003.*

One example is the House's guest lecture program. Virtually non-existent five years ago, the program now involves regular invitations for the Speaker and the Clerk of the House to address universities and other organisations across Australia. The Clerk, Ian Harris, says the Speaker enjoys meeting "tomorrow's leaders". In fact, he was so engrossed in discussions at Murdoch University in Perth recently, he missed his flight home.

As a step towards this goal, Speaker Andrew wrote to the Procedure Committee last year, inviting them to look at the possibility of introducing questions and answers at the end of second reading speeches.

"Mostly during a second reading speech the chamber will have only two or three people in it, and it's not because the other members are off playing cards, it's because they're busy

are genuinely without notice. He admits, however, it would be very difficult for any Speaker to determine what is, and what isn't, a *dorothy dixer*.

He doesn't think it's possible, however, to change the standing orders in respect of answers. There's only one standing order for answers, and it requires that an answer be relevant to the question. Relevance allows a lot of latitude for any Speaker.

"If the Treasurer is asked a question about income tax and he talks about fuel excise, it's still government revenue, so am I going to rule that out of order on the grounds of relevance? No. It's often the case in politics that there's a huge gap between utopia and reality, and this place is about reality, and some people's image for reform seems a bit utopian," he says.

Another idea he thinks is worth exploring is introducing time limits for questions and time limits for answers, as in the Senate. He acknowledges the current situation of having a minimum number of questions has increased the opportunities for scrutiny, but he believes limiting the time for answers would also assist in maintaining relevance.

He admits question time can be confrontational, but Speaker Andrew says it plays a very important role in holding the government to account.

"Most people around the world look at our question time and are astonished we have a parliament where the Prime Minister fronts up every sitting day and answers questions absolutely without notice," he says.

And if things do get out of hand, he can warn, sin bin or suspend members from the House. In fact, one notable day four years ago he sin-binned six members, three from the opposition and three from the government, including the first minister banished from the House in 39 years.

Sin-binning three from each side sounds like the perfect illustration of a fair and impartial Speaker, or is it a Speaker being too tough on his own side? Whatever the case, there are regular calls for a more independent Speaker, a call Speaker Andrew flatly rejects as "nonsense".

"I think it's too easy to talk about an independent chair and forget the obvious, and that is, whoever chairs the House of Representatives or any other meeting depends on a majority on the floor to stay in office, and the occupier of the chair constitutionally has to be a member of the House," he says.

Therefore the Constitution rules out the option of an outsider, such as a High Court



Watching Governor-General Michael Jeffery assent to his first piece of legislation after becoming Governor-General.

But there comes a time when every Speaker must vacate the chair. For Speaker Andrew, the first Speaker in 25 years to serve two terms in office, his decision coincides with his 60th birthday and boundary changes in South Australia.

"My wife and I talked about this 12 months ago and I talked to the Prime Minister before the boundaries were drawn up ... I have mixed feelings about it ... but I think it's probably wise for the Speakership to rotate every two or three terms, and maybe two is wiser than three," he says.

Regarding changes he'd like to make to parliament, Speaker Andrew says there's not enough spontaneity in debate. He'd like members to throw away their written speeches and speak from the heart. It's a call that sends shivers down the spine of spin-doctors in today's world of strictly message-managed politics, but Neil Andrew is convinced more lively debate would improve the public's perception of the parliamentary process.

with other things. I'd like to bring them into the House, to be listening to their opposing members and asking questions," he says.

The Procedure Committee agreed with the Speaker. The Committee Chair, Margaret May, said: "We understand how busy members are, but an empty chamber is not what the community expects of its parliament. If the proposed arrangements do indeed invigorate debate, more members might remain in the chamber to listen to their colleagues' speeches as well as to ask questions. In turn this would enhance the public's perception of the significance of parliamentary proceedings."

The committee recommended a trial commence this year, in which second reading speeches are reduced from 20 minutes to 15 minutes, with five minutes set aside for questions and answers. The House has yet to consider this matter.

Speaker Andrew would also like members to throw away their written questions in question time and ask more questions which

judge, being appointed Speaker, but what about an Independent MP in the chair? Speaker Andrew says it wouldn't change a thing. They, like everybody, are philosophically more comfortable with one side than the other.

"Everyone wants it to be a place of free speech but they bristle when what they're hearing isn't what they want to hear."

He sees some merit in the British system in which the Speaker abandons all party loyalties; they are usually unopposed at election time, and even when the government changes, the current Speaker generally is re-elected to office. However, their constituents lose their party voice, which Speaker Andrew has been very careful to retain, not from the chair, but by attending party meetings.

Speaker Andrew says he, like his predecessors, has strived to be impartial. He's been careful to make himself equally available to all parties, and he's taken his role very seriously in protecting everybody's right to be heard.

"But it's one of the strange things about the chamber—everyone wants it to be a place of free speech but they bristle when what they're hearing isn't what they want to hear," he says.

Earlier this year, Speaker Andrew sparked controversy when he suspended photographers from the chamber for taking photographs of a protestor leaping from the public gallery. This, the Speaker says, was a clear breach of the guidelines governing photography in the chamber, which state photographs of the public gallery and photographs of disturbances are not permitted.

"The public gallery is out of bounds for the same reasons televising streakers at cricket matches is out of bounds, so as not to encourage that kind of behaviour," he says.

The Speaker's actions banning the photographers caused some anger in certain sections of the media, with calls for the guidelines to be revised. Speaker Andrew is standing firm, insisting the guidelines are reasonable.

"Every other parliament around the world as far as I can tell has guidelines more rigid than ours," he says, "and I think there's an emerging understanding in the press gallery that I'm not being pig headed ... that what we are doing is fairly lenient and liberal by world standards."

He admits it will be an ongoing debate, as well as an ongoing inquiry for the Procedure Committee, which is currently examining all aspects of media coverage in the House.

Another controversial ruling occurred last October, when Speaker Andrew suspended two senators from an historic joint meeting of both houses after they interrupted the speech by visiting US President George Bush. The 24-hour suspension effectively banned the two senators from attending a joint meeting the next day, addressed by Chinese President Hu.

The Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans, questioned whether the actions of the Speaker were constitutional, saying the Speaker of the House of Representatives did not have the authority to ban senators from

Australia internationally at a variety of round tables and functions.

An astute administrator, Speaker Andrew counts as one of his greatest achievements the amalgamation of five parliamentary departments into three. The Departments of the Parliamentary Library, Parliamentary Reporting Staff and Joint House have merged into the new Department of Parliamentary Services. The Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of the Senate continue unchanged.

"We've had five departments for 100 years, and for 80 years we've wanted to change it," he says. "It means a rationalisation and improvement in service delivery, as well as offering significant gains in effectiveness and efficiency".



Visiting Armidale (NSW) as part of the House's lecture program, with local MP Tony Windsor and students and staff from Sandon Public School and the University of New England.

a meeting of the Senate, even though it was a joint meeting with the House of Representatives. Speaker Andrew says he found the Clerk's observations a little amusing, considering the Senate had agreed to follow House procedures as far as applicable, and he had the full support of the President of the Senate, Senator Paul Calvert.

"If the day was repeated this week, I'd do exactly the same thing," he says.

While this episode was one of the most tense in his career, the two-world-leaders-in-two-days experience was also one of his greatest highlights. Here he was, the Riverland "blockie" meeting the Presidents of the United States and China. These opportunities to meet fascinating people, he says, are the extraordinary privileges of office.

Other highlights have included the Centenary of Federation celebrations, when he walked the length of Westminster Abbey as part of the commemoration of the passage of the bill to establish Australia's federal parliament. He has also represented

Neil Andrew acknowledges the tremendous support he's received, both as Speaker and as Member for Wakefield, from his wife Carolyn. "Having a supportive partner and objective critic makes a huge difference in any profession," he says.

A former primary producer, Mr Andrew plans to return to his Adelaide home, tend his 40 acres of Riverland oranges, pursue his interests in the Murray-Darling and overseas aid, and spend time with his wife and family.

He's pleased to report that his official portrait, yet to be unveiled, has made a "silk purse out of a sow's ear". Or perhaps it has just captured the qualities of Neil Andrew, 26th Speaker of the House of Representatives, as defined by the House guide to practices and procedures: "a good Speaker is not necessarily an extraordinary person ... he is an ordinary person, but an ordinary person of the highest calibre." ■

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