



About the House TV

Transcript: Parliament House Architecture

February 2009

Video presentation at www.aph.gov.au/visitors

[Voice over] Parliament House, Canberra. The meeting place for the nation's elected representatives. 150 members in the House of Representatives and 76 Senators. It's a building famous for its flagpole...and its personalities...

[Audio and vision of House of Representatives chamber; Hon Anthony Albanese, Member for Grayndler, at the Despatch Box] ... they've got 33 Shadow Ministers shadowing 30 Ministers! Two of them are shadowing each other! That's the only way, the only way you can come up with that conclusion, Mr Speaker...

[Voice over] But what influence does a parliament's design have on its style? This is a question which has occupied Adelaide academic, Clem Macintyre, who's been studying the relationship between parliamentary architecture and political culture.

Dr Clem Macintyre, University of Adelaide: Parliamentary Buildings are intrinsically interesting to any political commentator. They are the place where the debates take place; they are the theatres of State, as they have been called. And I think that the way in which the buildings have been designed and the space has been configured within them can have an influence upon the way in which political behaviour is carried out. So as an observer of politics I just like keeping an eye on the way in which those buildings relate, and the way in which the Institutions change partly influenced by the building and the way in which they try and rework the building to suit the activities of the Institution also.

[Voice over] Since federation, the Australian parliament has sat in three different houses. From 1901, it sat in the Victorian Parliament House in Melbourne. In 1927, it moved to Canberra, where it sat in what is now Old Parliament House.

Kay Patterson, Former Senator for Victoria: I shared an office with my staff and I had a printer under the stairs outside, because the printer – you know, a big plastic printer with a cover – didn't fit. So it was very squashed, [camera panning over layout of an office in Old Parliament House] it was very difficult when you were there from seven in the morning until three the next morning with your staff member. So people thought 'oh, it was wonderful it was down' but up here it was much easier and it much more of a work environment but they were complaining when they first came up here.

Ian Harris, Clerk of the House of the Representatives: There was some nostalgia in leaving the old building behind. There was a lot of celebration about shifting into a new building, just like shifting into any new residence, but the building we were leaving behind was the building where the leading lights of Australian political history, like Menzies, Curtin and Chifley, had operated from. So, most of us felt a tinge of sadness as well as that exhilaration of coming to the new building.

Harry Jenkins, Speaker of the House of Representatives: I think that all of us that came up to here to the new Parliament House did so with great excitement because it was a new era. It probably wasn't until we got up here that we realised we had great attachment that there was to the old place. [Camera panning over vision of House of Representatives chamber and office suite in Old Parliament House] Without wanting to return to it, because the conditions were just beyond the pale and we would never have been able to move into the type of technology [now used]. But certainly, the way people related to the provisional Parliament House was a lot different due to the lack of space because you were, literally, on top of each other.

[Voice over] The move to the new house in 1988 allowed members and senators to spread out across 250-thousand square metres of floor space. One of the largest buildings in the southern hemisphere, it was a very different work environment.

Anne Lynch, former Deputy Clerk of the Senate (1973 – 2005): It was much more formidable to get your bearings, first of all, and also to interact with people. It is a much more hierarchical House than the old House. You couldn't help but bump into Senators, Members, members of staff, journalists – here it was much more structured and much more formal and I found that much more difficult to adjust to.

Harry Jenkins: There became a generation of Members, the ones that actually came up from the old House that realised that there was another way of doing things where you had to try to tell people 'please, have the interaction' whether it be with the staff of the departments, fellow members or Ministers – this place means that you do have to put in a bit of effort to do things that just happened in old Parliament House.

Kay Patterson: Because our offices were small in the old Parliament House, people went to the bar or they went to the dining room or they went to places to get away from being in the office with their staff, and therefore, they met more frequently [camera panning over vision of dining room in Old Parliament House]. I think if there was anything I'd say that was different, it is that you don't see your colleagues quite as much; you don't see the people from the House of Reps except at Party meetings and in the dining room. And you don't see the Ministers. I think I said if I'd change anything, I would have had the Ministers mixing up and not in the Ministerial wing [of the building]. I think that is a danger – not a danger – but, you distance yourself from the backbenchers.

Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate: The first impression was it was too big, there was too much glass, too many sharp angles all over the place. But that now seems appropriate, it now seems full of light [camera panning over Senate chamber], full of space and seems to be much better than the old building.

Clem Macintyre: The working spaces for the members work well. [Camera panning over vision of a Member of Parliament working in his office, then follows him from his office into the House of Representatives chamber] I think that anybody who had worked at the old parliament and then had the opportunity to work here would have no doubt that this is a better place – ergonomically, health and safety and all sorts of aspects like that. The physical amenities of the building – I think that works well. The bit that I think is less successful is the interaction of the public and the members [camera shot of House of Representatives chamber from public gallery, then from the floor of the chamber]. I suppose my other main concern is just in the chambers, the principle rooms in the Parliament – the House of Representatives and the Senate. [I think that] those are certainly bigger than the old chambers and I think that has changed the character of behaviour in those chambers too. The same sense of tension and energy that you sometimes saw in the old parliament is not as evident here as it was.

Ian Harris: It's a wonderful building; it's a great work of art. It has plenty of room. Sometimes, the functional aspects are not quite as effective as in the old building. The old chamber was much smaller and members could engage in debate and there was much more interchange of personalities, I think, in the old building. The new building is an extensive building – sometimes, that has its own challenges.

Harry Evans: One of the concerns I have is that when people come here they are so impressed by the building and they are told so much about the building that they don't give quite as much attention as they should to the institution that operates in the building. [Camera panning over aerial view of Parliament House] I'd rather people paid more attention to the institution and how it should operate and how it is operating, than the building.

[ends]