



Melissa Price
Member for Durack (WA)



Pat Conroy
Member for Charlton (NSW)



Cathy McGowan
Member for Indi (Vic)

Opportunity knocks

Forty-two new MPs were elected to the House of Representatives for the 44th Parliament, 29 men and 13 women. Three of them talk about the chance they now have to deal with the issues that matter to their communities.

Interviews: Alan Jenkins
MP photos: Joe Italiano

The biggest issue is the diversification of industry

“About three years ago, the opportunity came up to stand for preselection for the state seat of Kalgoorlie, late 2012, and I just missed out there. But after that of course I had the taste for it and with my predecessor deciding to retire only eight weeks or so before the federal election, I threw my hat in the ring and won the preselection against 12 other people.

It was a very quick turnaround. I had a six week campaign and slept a different night in a different bed for six weeks. It was exhilarating, exhausting but most of all it was incredibly informative of what the needs were of the people of Durack.

Coming to Parliament House, in the first week or so I thought, ‘This is going to be the shortest political career known to man,’ mainly because of the work of the chamber. You can watch Question Time on the telly but until you’re sitting there on those green seats, you have no idea what really is going on, but a few very wise heads said to me, ‘Don’t worry, Melissa, just sit, watch, observe, and you will eventually find the rhythm of the House,’ and they were absolutely right.

My focus during the first term is on being a strong voice for Durack. With an electorate of 1.6 million square kilometres and some 45 shire councils, the task of understanding everyone’s issues is enormous. It’s also the diversity of industries. I’ve got all the oil and gas, all the iron ore resources projects, but I also have a large part of the wheatbelt. Small business is a very important sector, and I have the third-highest number of Indigenous constituents in Australia.

The biggest issue for my constituents is the diversification of industry. We’ve got a very large small business sector, farmers are included in that definition of small business, and if we can develop that part, then I think together with a sustainable mining industry and also a very strong agricultural sector, it’s going to be a very strong electorate.

Somehow I’ve ended up on an awful amount of committees, but they are all very important when it comes to Durack — matters relating to Indigenous affairs, infrastructure, agriculture — and I’m also on the Northern Australia



Melissa Price, Member for Durack (WA)

Select Committee. The objective of the white paper and ultimately the policies that will come out of that by the Abbott government is to develop the north, so we need good ideas about how industry is going to be improved, how land and water and energy is going to be obtained and utilised, how we tap into those markets in Asia, how we improve the infrastructure.

By the time of the next election, I hope that the constituents will have faith in me, that I know what their issues are and that I’m working very hard to promote them, but also to resolve issues that they’ve got. I may not have achieved everything, and we know in this current economic situation that we find ourselves in that it’s not always going to be possible, but that they know I’m going to try my darndest to achieve what’s needed for Durack.”



I'm fighting for increased expenditure for a crucial piece of infrastructure

Pat Conroy, Member for Charlton (NSW)

"When I moved to the Hunter Valley, to Newcastle working for Greg Combet, I'd always been a member of a Labor Party branch, on the Central Coast originally and then in Sydney, and when I joined my branches up there I got probably more interested in standing for public office if the opportunity presented itself.

As a backbench MP you have less of a formal role in developing policy than a staffer, but you have the ability to inject yourself into debates when you choose to. To start discussions within caucus and in parliament and carry things through is something that no staffer could do. It's something that only members of parliament can or should do. One of the challenges is learning what the correct avenues are as a member of parliament to advance the interests of your electorate and the nation.

The four common issues that Charlton has with the rest of Australia are: one – jobs, having a sustainable local economy; secondly – good investment in infrastructure; thirdly – having well-funded local schools and having a focus on education; and fourthly – adequate health funding.

In terms of our local challenges, we're an electorate that's very diverse. The two biggest employers in the region now with the closure of the local steelworks are the local area health service and the local university. We've also got significant heavy manufacturing in the area, coal mining and energy production, we have the largest power station in the country, we still have six operational coalmines and we're an area that's very proud of our coal mining legacy that built the region.

We've also got the challenge of climate change. We have the largest saltwater lake in the southern hemisphere in my electorate so climate change will affect us quite markedly in advance of other communities. Trying to articulate a narrative and policy solution for the people of Charlton with all these different issues is very challenging.

A variety of things fill my week when I'm in Canberra. You've always got Question Time, and I'm on two parliamentary committees. Committee work takes up a lot of time. Preparing speeches on legislation and other issues of importance takes up a lot of time as well.

In my first term the most important thing is to be a strong voice for my constituents. I'm fighting for increased expenditure for the Glendale Transport Interchange, which is a crucial piece of infrastructure for the region. Another one is to win increased funding for local schools. A lot of my schools are in very poor areas where they have sub-optimal resources.

I'm also running a campaign with other MPs to make sure our local shipyard, which employs 900 people, and the shipyards around our country have enough work to stay open, which is very important for our national defence, as well as the jobs for those families."



Politics is for building communities that function

Cathy McGowan, Member for Indi (Vic)

“Truth of the matter is that it was the 7th of September, we’d won Wodonga, Wangaratta and we almost won Benalla. We hadn’t expected to win but we did think we’d come second and make the seat marginal. So when those numbers came in from the major urban centres, and then the next 10 days of counting, there was a bit of ‘This might actually happen’.

We moved into an empty office, there were no phones that worked, no computers, no staff, and there were rules about everything. Very quickly we got under control with that, but then coming up to parliament for the first week, a lot happened very quickly and we didn’t have the advisory systems in place about how all that worked.

Navigating the identical corridors of Parliament House wasn’t so bad. I’m a farmer: very quickly I got the north and south organised – though I have been lost a few times. And we had a fantastic induction, I really commend the staff of Parliament House.

I’ve coped well with getting used to parliamentary procedures, I think, and acknowledge the people at the Table Office, the clerks have been fantastic, and the library. I’ve spoken in the Reps and Federation chambers, and I’m a member of the House of Reps Standing Committee on Agriculture. Agriculture is one of my main interests, so that committee is where I’ll be able to do my long-term influential work.

The key issues for my constituents are that people can live, work, raise their families and have good productive lives in communities. Specific issues are mostly infrastructure — public transport, the railway line between Albury and Melbourne needs a lot of work, mobile phone black spots and access to NBN.

Equally important is mental health services and all other health service delivery. Education — Indi is particularly

vulnerable in terms of tertiary and TAFE education, so we really need to be strategic about how we advance our cause for access to tertiary and other forms of training. Then there’s a long-term plan for agriculture. Indi is a massively fertile, productive region and agricultural manufacturing is really important and we need to think about how we’re going to grow it.

The people of Indi wanted respect for community — that politics is not for politics’ sake. Politics is for building communities that function, deliver for people, that help us raise our families. I want to be able to go back and say that I’ve respected communities, enhanced them and responded to them.

The second thing I want to be able to say to my communities is that I turned up. I was a politician that was in touch with her electorate and represented them, and we had really good discussion about what that meant, so there’s no sense at all that I’ve got all of the answers but I have represented people.

Third is that we’ve made substantial headway on some of the really big issues, many of these are long-term, and we’ve begun putting in place the foundations to make sure that Indi is economically viable, socially cohesive and environmentally sound in the future, and that we’re well and truly on that track.” ■