

Making a difference

They come from different backgrounds and different political parties, but they share a desire to make a difference. Eighteen months after first being elected to the House of Representatives, three Members talk about their experiences and find some common ground in their dealings in the House.

"I didn't know whether I could make a difference or whether I would just be a voice in the wind," said Kay Hull, National Party Member for Riverina (New South Wales). "I was a bit concerned that I would just be a number in the party room. But the reality was quite different. I found very early on in the piece that it was easier to have an impact on legislation than I first thought."

Hull's main focus has been to address issues of concern to her electorate, which includes the NSW regional centres of Griffith and Wagga Wagga. A major issue was the wine equalisation tax and the impact it would have on wineries in her electorate.

"There is a perception that Cabinet makes all the decisions, and that backbench Members do not have much of an opportunity to have a say", noted Hull. "But the process is much more democratic than I ever thought it would be."

As part of the debate on the wine equalisation tax, Hull put together a team of people from her electorate, who came to Canberra and assisted her in making representations to the Treasurer, his advisers and Treasury officials. "Being able to call in experts from my electorate really helped in mounting credible arguments in support of our cause," she said.

Hull stressed that with sound, logical arguments, Members can raise the concerns of their electorates with Ministers and can convince both Ministers and their advisers that proposed laws need to be changed. "The important thing," says Hull, "is not just to identify the problems but also to come up with solutions."

'the process is much more democratic'

According to Michelle O'Byrne, Australian Labor Party Member for Bass (Tasmania), one of the problems is that people often view the House of Representatives as a win or lose battleground. "You hear, for example, the media talking about the Opposition drawing blood in Question Time or the Government winning points."

From O'Byrne's experience, Question Time is not truly reflective of the processes that are normally followed in the House. "Debate continues in the House much beyond Question Time in a civilised and structured manner. There also are many cooperative processes such as committee work and the consultations that go on among Members, with people sharing ideas and experiences from their electorates – almost like some sort of cross-fertilisation of ideas."

One of the surprises for O'Byrne has been the extent of time involved in dealing with legislation. "Before being elected to the House, I didn't appreciate the amount of work that Members needed to put into each piece of legislation. But the benefit is that all Members have the opportunity to put their views forward about proposed laws."

Like Kay Hull, O'Byrne cited her participation in the debate on the wine equalisation tax as one of the highlights of her time in the House to date. O'Byrne was alerted to problems with the tax when she began receiving calls in her electorate office. "As a Member from a regional electorate with a growing wine industry, people came to me with their concerns and, as a result of those contacts, I was able to follow up the issues with industry representatives. I was then able to respond to those concerns through the lobbying that I was able to do."

O'Byrne noted that one of the interesting things in politics is that people often assume that you join political parties and run for office simply because you have ministerial ambitions. "There can be an assumption that success in politics is measured by how far you work your way up the political ladder. But many of us recognise that our real role is representing our electorate in the best way possible. Sometimes you do that as a Minister or Shadow Minister, sometimes you do that by being a good and accessible local Member."

'make sure the messages are getting through'

According to O'Byrne, the role of a Member really has two sides to it. "I spend a lot of time doing community work to make sure that I am aware of the issues affecting the people of north-east Tasmania. I also have to operate effectively in Canberra to make sure that the messages from the people I represent are getting through in the House and in policy formulation."

Finding out the views of the electorate is one of the many challenges faced by Members. And none face more of a challenge than the Member for the largest electorate in Australia and the world, Kalgoorlie (Western Australia).

Barry Haase, the Liberal Member for Kalgoorlie, has faced the daunting task of representing an electorate that covers the greater part of Western Australia. Haase commented: "Since being elected to the House, my priorities have been to meet with the diverse range of people in my electorate, listen to their concerns, address their problems and keep them informed of developments in issues that affect them. This has involved significant travel around the electorate which, when combined with time in Canberra, has allowed me to spend only 72 nights in my own home during the past 12 months."

According to Haase, an important part of his role is to show people that the work he undertakes in the House in Canberra is relevant to their lives. And to be relevant, he has focused on those issues that have been of most concern to his electorate.

One such issue was the removal of fringe benefits tax from employer provided housing in remote areas. "From my discussions around the electorate, it was obvious that the fringe benefits tax on employer provided housing had helped to gut remote communities. So it was important for me to help bring about legislation that would remove this impact of the tax," Haase said.

Haase has been impressed by the opportunities that Members have to consider legislation, raise issues, and garner support in party room discussions. At the same time, he values the work that is undertaken by parliamentary committees. In particular, he cited

nce 18 months on

his involvement with the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Native Title and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund. Both committees have considered issues of significance to his electorate, which includes the vast Kimberley region of Western Australia, and the nation as a whole.

'foundation of effective links'

"Committee work has enabled my parliamentary colleagues and I to visit a number of communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory and to gather much information about the issues that are important to those communities," said Haase. "That has allowed us, through committee reports, to put realistic proposals to the Parliament and the Minister. In that sense, committees are the foundation of one of the most effective links between the electorate and the Parliament."

So, after 18 months, is there anything that these Members would like to see change in the way the House operates?

"Like many other Members," said Michelle O'Byrne "I think that family friendly sitting hours for the House is an issue that needs further attention. Parliament House is a large community and there are many demands placed on people working there. We need to ensure that, despite the hours all of us work, we can maintain some consistency in our family lives."

For Kay Hull and Barry Haase, their wish list includes having sufficient resources to maintain adequate contact with people in their large electorates. Haase commented: "People talk about one vote one value and equal representation in Parliament, but the reality of my electorate is that some people live 2,000 kilometres from the nearest electorate office. It is in that context that resources become an important issue, so that there is equity in the way that people across Australia have access to their elected representatives."

Kay Hull MP

Kay Hull (National Party) is the Member for Riverina in New South Wales. Before entering Parliament, Hull was a small business owner and operator. She has also been Deputy Mayor and a Councillor of the Wagga Wagga City Council.

Riverina is a rural and regional electorate in central western New South Wales. It includes the towns of Griffith, Hay, Hillston, Junee, Leeton, Narrandera, Wagga Wagga and West Wyalong. Its industries include wheat, wool, barley, cattle, lambs, poultry, eggs, fruit, rice, vegetables, canneries, viticulture, wine, tourism and light manufacturing.

Hull is a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration and the House of Representatives Publications Committee.



Barry Haase MP

Barry Haase (Liberal Party) is the Member for Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Before entering Parliament, he was a company director in the fields of air conditioning and building maintenance and, prior to that, he worked in catering management.

Kalgoorlie is a rural electorate that takes up the greater part of Western Australia, apart from the south-west corner. It includes the centres of Broome, Boulder, Carnarvon, Coolgardie, Dampier, Derby, Esperance, Exmouth, Halls Creek, Kalbarri, Kalgoorlie, Karratha, Merredin, Newman, Norseman, Northampton, Port Hedland, Wiluna and Wyndham. Its industries include mining, cattle, sheep, fishing, tropical fruits and vegetables.

Haase is a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund.

Michelle O'Byrne MP

Michelle O'Byrne (Australian Labor Party) is the Member for Bass in Tasmania. Before entering Parliament, she was an electorate officer for Senator Kerry O'Brien and, prior to that, an Industrial Officer for the Miscellaneous Workers' Union.

Bass is a provincial electorate in north-east Tasmania. It includes the city of Launceston and the centres of Bridport, George Town and Scottsdale. It also includes Flinders Island. Industries include farming, fishing, textiles, metals, wool, meat, woodchips, timber, boat building, port facilities, brewery, wine, education and tourism.

