

Crack that whip

Whips are the grease in the 'wheels' of the parliamentary process. Among their many roles, they make sure Members turn up to vote in the House. Peter Cotton reports on the pressures that Whips face to ensure the 'wheels' don't fall off.



Whips are members of the Selection Committee, which meets weekly with Deputy Speaker Garry Nehl and two other Members to program committee and private Members' business for the House. Photo: AUSPIC

Michael Ronaldson's stomach still sinks a little when he recalls the day late last November when the Government came within a whisker of losing a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Going down in that vote would not only have raised questions about the Government's ability to manage the House.

As Chief Government Whip, Ronaldson says it would also have cost him his job – one of the roles of the Whip is to muster Members for votes in the Chamber.

The House had been particularly unruly on that November day. The Opposition had put up a dissent motion against a ruling by Speaker Neil Andrew, and the Speaker had called a division to allow a vote on the matter.

Bells calling Members to the Chamber rang for one minute and the doors were then closed. When the numbers for and against the dissent motion were tallied, the vote was tied 57-all.

Amidst rowdy scenes, and with many Government Members standing locked outside the Chamber, the Speaker declared that confusion about procedures meant there should be another vote. The ruling sparked a rare walkout by Labor Members.

It was a terrible moment for Ronaldson, and the Chief Whip now says that had the Government lost the vote, there would have been some dramatic flow-ons.

"For a start, I would've had to tender my resignation," he says. "But far more importantly, it would've sent out a message that the Government was in disarray and that sort of thing impacts on Members back in their electorates, especially those from marginal seats. At the end of the day we won the vote, but it was a good lesson for all involved."

While that tied vote underscores the crucial part Government Whips play in getting legislation through the House, a Whip's duties go well beyond the role suggested by their arcane title.

The job involves a diverse set of tasks with a common thread: Whips are the grease in the wheels of the parliamentary process. Always the organisers, sometimes the goaders, they are a tradition in the Westminster system of government, drawing their name from aristocratic England's favourite pastime: fox-hunting. The person who kept the hounds together in the pack was called the 'whipper-in'.

The term 'Whip' was first used in the British House of Commons in 1769 by Edmund Burke to describe any vigorous in-House lobbying.

From the early seventeenth century, documents known as 'whips' circulated in the Commons instructing Party Members how to vote in divisions.

The term was later applied to Members who fulfilled the same function. These Whips also organised Members to attend the Chamber and saw to the administration of their party.

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The role of the Whip was introduced to the Australian Parliament from its earliest days in 1901 – the first Government Whip was the then Member for Eden-Monaro, Austin Chapman. Like those who followed him in the job, Chapman kept a real whip in his office as a symbol of his position and its origins.

As well as ensuring that Members attend the Chamber for divisions and quorums, Whips list speakers for debates and are appointed by the Speaker as 'tellers' to count the votes during divisions.

They organise 'pairs' for absent Members. In 'pairing', the Opposition agrees to withdraw one of its Members from voting in the House when a Government Member needs to be absent.

Outside the Chamber, Whips are organisers for their political parties. They advise and coordinate party committees, arrange nominations for party and parliamentary committees, and organise party balloting.

Some Whips also hold senior positions on committees. As well as being a Whip for the National Party, the Member for Hinkler, Paul Neville, also chairs the House Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts.

The Government has five Whips, the Opposition three.

The Chief Government Whip, in tandem with the Leader of Government Business in the House, runs the daily business of the Chamber and the Main Committee.

Chief Government Whip Michael Ronaldson says that when Government Members fail to make a division, he invites them down to his office for a chat rather than criticising them to their colleagues.

"If you call on people to do the right thing, most of them will do just that," says Ronaldson. "Any recalcitrant action in this place always impacts on someone else. That's the message I always try to get across to Members. As for sanctions, they're usually verbal in nature, rather than anything else. I do have other means but they're best kept in my top drawer."

Asked about the day last November when Labor nearly bested the Government in numbers on the floor of the House, Labor Whip and Member for Port Adelaide, Rod Sawford, says he regards that tied vote as a win for Labor.

"When we were in Government", says Sawford, "Whips always had our numbers marshalled. An Opposition can pull a stunt at any time of the day or night and you have to have your numbers ready."

Ask Chief Opposition Whip Leo McLeay about Labor's near win last year and he demonstrates surprising sympathy for his opposite number: "I like Ronno," says McLeay when talking about Ronaldson. "I get on well with him and I felt sorry for him on the day. He would have been down in the PM's office that afternoon having himself kicked to death. If the Government loses a vote, they look like a pack of goats and it means the Whip's gotta go."

Little wonder then that with the stakes so high the eight Whips in the House know where all their Members are at any time the House is sitting.

"I alert the leaders to any gripes among the backbench."

They also know which Members make a habit of "cutting it fine" when called to a division.

"You see their name on the list and your hands start sweating," says Government Whip, Jim Lloyd, the Member for Robertson.

Liberal Party Whip and Member for Corangamite, Stewart McArthur, says new Parliament House was configured in such a way as to ensure that every Member could get to the Chamber within four minutes – the time allowed for the ringing of division bells calling Members to a vote. "But some of them have to move pretty quickly," he says. "If you're in the dining room, you have to drop your knife and fork and move immediately."

It's not uncommon for Members to turn up to the Chamber soaking wet, having heard the bells while taking a shower or using the Parliament House swimming pool.

According to Mr McArthur, the office of Minister for Defence, Peter Reith, is the furthest from the Chamber. "It's about 500 metres one way," he says. "If there are three successive divisions and Peter goes back to his office after each one, he's done a route

march to make those divisions. And there are no short cuts."

Mr McArthur agrees with Labor's Rod Sawford that most MPs have had the door to the Chamber closed in their face. "It may seem humorous but it's a serious matter," says McArthur. "It's even been alleged that some Members have elbowed their way past an attendant to gain entry to the Chamber, just as the doors were closing."

Rod Sawford says most Members will miss at least one division in their time in politics. It's the repeat offenders who draw the attention of the Whips. "People who consistently miss divisions or who don't turn up to speak in the Chamber get cautioned," says Sawford. "It's gentle the first time. After that they get a strong talking to. Once we threatened to contact a Member's local branch if he didn't improve. That stopped him."

Sawford has been a Whip for 11 years. He oversees procedures for Labor, and the numbers, in the House of Representatives second chamber, along with fellow Labor Whip and Member for Maribyrnong, Bob Sercombe. The second chamber (called the Main Committee) deals with non-controversial legislation, but it's still a place of robust debate.

According to Leo McLeay, Members know that if the Whip cautions them on any matter, it's in their interests to take the Whip's advice. "People know that the Whip is a factor in their advancement and it's best to play the game," he says.

Mr McLeay, the Member for Watson, rejects the term 'enforcer' to describe his role. He says the word is "a bit heavy", but concedes that it does give some sense of what he does.

"People are a bit more sophisticated these days," says McLeay, "but some people, sometimes, need strong counselling."

Leo McLeay says Whips are also a conduit between the Party's leadership group and backbenchers. "I make sure backbenchers know what the leaders are thinking," says McLeay, "and I alert the leaders to any gripes among the backbench. I ensure that I don't colour what I pass on. Keep it straight and both sides know you're telling the truth."

The Chief Whip for the National Party, John Forrest, Member for Mallee, says he has no power to discipline Members from his

Party who fail to turn up in the Chamber for a division. "The National Party is a creature of its grass roots and only the grass roots can remove a Member. I have no control over that," he says. "I have no big stick other than my moral authority. We have our own tensions, any family does, but there's no point yelling at some people."

Mr Forrest says a Whip has to be forgiving when Members do the wrong thing. "I've missed a division myself since I've been a Whip," he says. "Accidents can happen. It was the day Allan Border and the Australian cricket team visited Parliament House. I was engrossed in a conversation with the Waugh twins about their recently deceased grandfather. The bells were ringing but I couldn't get away quickly enough. I made it to the door of the Chamber just as it slammed shut in my face."

"Ronno has his own way of dealing with these things," says Forrest. "I knew I'd done the wrong thing and it'll never happen again. I'm very cautious now. I'm never more than four minutes away from the Chamber. I don't want to let Ronno down again."

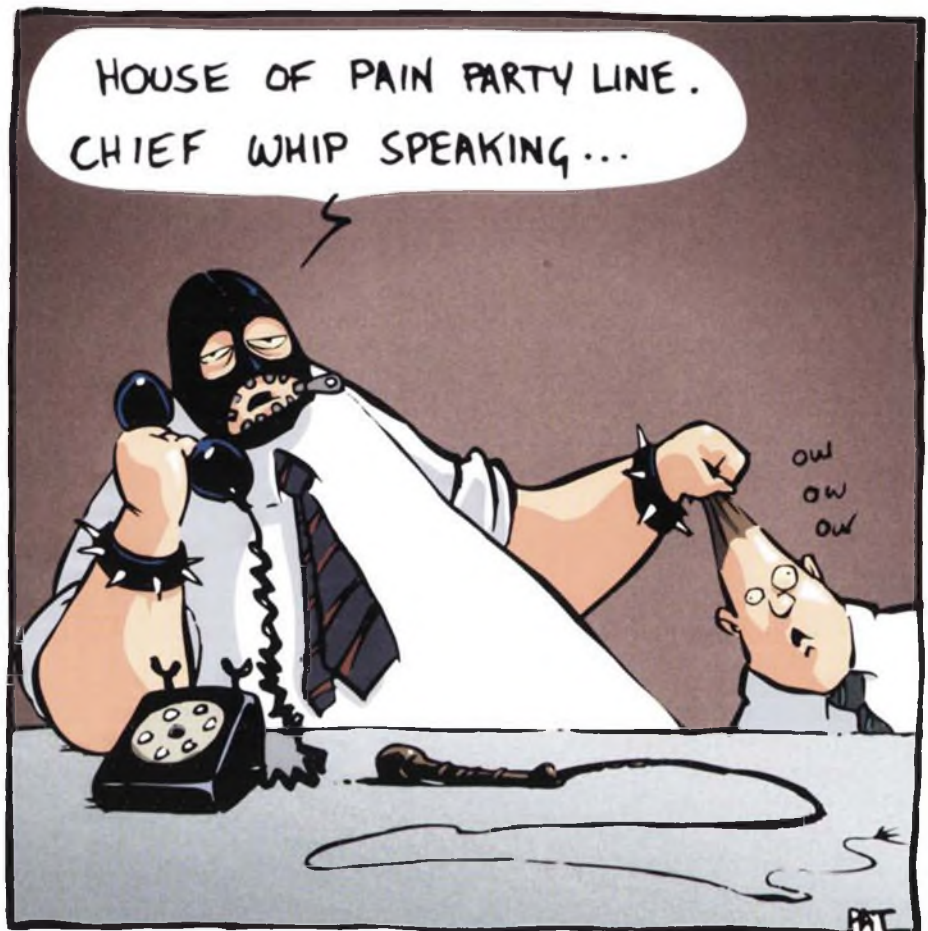
According to the National Party's other Whip, Paul Neville, senior Government Members such as the Foreign Minister and Trade Minister are sometimes needed away from the House on government business.

That makes the numbers tighter and puts added pressure on Whips to marshal available Members.

Liberal Party Whip and Member for Robertson, Jim Lloyd, says one way of disciplining Members who repeatedly fail to get to divisions is to limit their chances for public exposure.

"Members are very keen to speak and there's a lot of competition for such opportunities," says Lloyd. "These opportunities are often allocated by the Whip. In a team situation, if people don't do the right thing, you have to make choices and if people aren't doing the right thing then they might miss out in the future. That's one of the small sticks we can wield."

As well as maintaining numbers in the Chamber and disciplining the odd recalcitrant Member, Labor's Rod Sawford says Whips have an important pastoral role in the House.



"As with everyone else, sometimes terrible things happen in the lives of politicians," says Sawford, a former high school headmaster.

"Their spouses get ill or die. People have accidents. Children get into mischief. And these things are sometimes made more difficult for politicians when Parliament is sitting because people from the far-flung States are a long way from home. And if things go wrong in their lives, it affects the way they perform in the Parliament."

"Sometimes people get down and they may only need someone to go up to them and say 'What's up mate?', just talk with them to get it out of their system," says Sawford.

"This is a pretty stressful job, but given the nature of what we do, people can't afford to admit that they've got a problem. Sometimes you need to keep a bit of an eye on people. Neither Bob Sercombe nor myself have a high profile and that's a good thing because Members know that we don't chase the media and so we're unlikely to let go of a

confidence. Once someone tells me something personal, it stays with me. People only confide in those they trust."

Leo McLeay concurs with his Party colleague. Asked for anecdotes about his life as a Whip, McLeay responds: "I think Whips should never tell tales because we know a lot of things about a lot of people. If you start telling tales people won't confidently talk to you."

Michael Ronaldson refers to it as "closed door trust". "Members have got to be confident that they can come in and tell you anything about their relationships with other Members, or things at home," he says. "They might want some advice, or just an ear," says Ronaldson.

Peter Cotton is a freelance journalist from Canberra. Illustration by Pat Campbell.