

**AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT
GROUP CONFERENCE 2010:
THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY —
PERCEPTIONS OF PARLIAMENT**

Fifteen (contradictory) perceptions of parliament: five good, five bad and five ugly

John Warhurst*

Introduction

Perceptions of parliament are mixed and often contradictory. They are often based on ignorance and are just as likely to be subjective as objective. They can be mere opinions, sometimes with a political purpose. In other words, they can be true or false; they can be media constructs for the purpose of selling newspapers; they are sometimes hurtful for those involved with the institution in one way or another. Nevertheless they must be recognised and assessed.

I am going to offer you fifteen perceptions — five good, five bad and five ugly. This enumeration alone suggests, unfortunately, that the balance leans towards the negative.

I am not going to sift through the contradictions, but I do suggest that it does matter whose perceptions we are talking about: the attentive public or the general, don't know don't care public, or the media or an academic like myself. Ignorance cannot be overemphasised. I am often struck by confusion over basics, such as the difference between parliament and government.

I also suggest that perceptions can be manufactured to make a political point. When the YES case suggested in the 1999 republic referendum that parliamentarians should select the president in an Australian Republic, for instance, it was alleged by the NO case that parliament was not to be trusted with this responsibility because it was a self-interested haven for deal-making. When a Bill of Rights was mooted earlier this year, it was suggested by many of the same critics that parliament was the pre-eminent defender of human rights and freedoms above any other institution such as the courts. These are just two examples.

* John Warhurst is Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Australian National University

The good

In compiling a list of fifteen perceived characteristics I am sorry to have to report that the hardest five to identify were the five good. The balance does tend to the negative. Nonetheless, the five good perceptions are as follows.

1. *Seat of power:* Parliament is still perceived as the seat of power and decision-making. There are two levels to this perception. One is the perception, generally dismissed by expert commentators, that parliament still has the power to keep the Executive under control as it should in the theory of responsible government. This flies in the face of the reality of major party dominance, but the perception remains, fuelled perhaps by the idea that Question Time does keep Governments and individual ministers under pressure.

The other level is the perception that individual parliamentarians have access to power. You can see evidence of this in every electorate at the moment as individuals and groups make every effort to interact with their local representatives and other election candidates. It is both touching and probably mostly futile. They believe MPs can be agents of change. But it does involve citizens in a great democratic institution.

2. *Salvation of the vulnerable:* I have already mentioned that parliament retains an image as defender of the rights of the community. This perception was commonly expressed with great certainty during the Bill of Rights debate by its defenders. It relies on the belief that parliament is free of executive control.

3. *Last resort:* Parliamentarians are still widely seen as a last resort for citizens who have problems with their poor treatment by government. The 'doctor's surgery' role of MPs is appreciated particularly with help in dealing with the bureaucracy and in the failure of government services. Many MPs (and their trusted staff) really do deliver for their constituents in this way and have a personal following as a result.

4. *Defender of the common good:* Parliament is seen as above the fray, having an element of impartiality in which everyone in the community, each citizen, is treated alike regardless of party affiliation, race or religion.

5. *Honourable vocation for high-minded individuals:* The widely-known surveys showing that parliamentarians as a group are often viewed as untrustworthy conceals the affection many citizens have for their own local MP. When pressed, most Australians would agree that their local MP is a hardworking servant of the community and that they have entered parliament with the best of motives. They are seen as honourable men and women by those who know them best in their own electorate.

The bad

The so-called bad characteristics paint a parliament that is definitely below par and even below a pass mark. These perceptions often directly contradict some of those already mentioned.

6. *Self-interested:* The image of MPs painted by the tabloid press and shared by many Australians is that MPs are self-interested, often in a venal way. This is demonstrated in many ways in discussions of their pay and conditions. The public think MPs are overpaid and react negatively to any mooted pay rises. They are not impressed by reports that many MPs, even leading ones, actually grizzle about being underpaid. Furthermore, it is a commonplace for the tabloids to report derisively on matters such as parliamentary study tours overseas. In the view of the media these are just another example of parliamentary lurks and perks.

7. *Out of touch and privileged:* Parliament, like universities, is considered to be an ivory tower, out of touch with the wider community. Parliamentarians themselves contribute to this view with stories such as former Senator John Button's well-known image of parliament as a Boarding School with all its overtones of childish behaviour (see below).

Undoubtedly parliamentarians are seen as privileged. Images of the accommodation for MPs in the new Parliament House reinforce this view (offices as big as houses). The privilege is also shown in widely-reported and envied first class travel and government cars with a driver. What is more parliamentarians appear to be surrounded by deferential staff and to treat some of those staff in an off-hand manner, taking their services for granted.

8. *Full of hacks and careerists:* A more recent perception, cultivated by inter-party criticism (Peter Costello was a master of this tactic), is of political life as a career track for inexperienced staffers and unworthy union officials who have never done a real day's work in their lives. Associated with this is reference to identikit politicians emerging from party finishing schools to put their plump bottoms on parliamentary benches.

9. *Bad mannered and lacking in civility:* Parliamentarians are often seen as lacking in common courtesies to one another. This widespread impression is an outcome of adversarial politics and can hardly be denied. That they can be seen on television shouting at one another leads to the oft reported view that the school children in the visitors galleries are better behaved than those adults down below who are supposed to be representing them. They should be models of best behaviour but so often are not. They engage in personal attacks. For a good example see 'Letters to the Editor' by Ross Kelly (*Canberra Times*, 18 June 2010) in which he says of this conduct: 'Many of their constituents would behave with more dignity at a minor business meeting, let alone in performing a solemn duty in Australia's Parliament House'.

10. Unrepresentative: A different tack on this negativity is the widespread notion that parliament is unrepresentative. The institution is full of old white males. What is needed is more women, indigenous peoples and other minorities. A related view is that there is an undue domination by a narrow range of occupations, such as lawyers, union officials, and the like.

The ugly

The ugly characteristics are interchangeable with the bad; perhaps it is merely a matter of taste, but they do have a sharper edge to them.

11. Corrupt: The first and most damaging perception is that parliamentarians are corrupt — and there have been many of examples of this in New South Wales, Queensland and West Australian parliaments in recent times, and the Commonwealth and the other states are not exempt. For years there have been reports of so-called travel rorts, involving MPs twisting, indeed, breaking the rules. More recently, associated with lobbying scandals, the level of possible corruption seems to be on a larger scale. It certainly does not help the image of parliament that former MPs, especially former ministers and premiers, seem to be so central to the lobbying industry. Politicians who are on the take or rorting the system certainly give parliament a bad name.

12. Irrelevant: Some see parliament as a not an assembly but a talking shop, full of hot air (see no. 7). This makes parliament irrelevant. Perhaps associated with this view is one that sees parliament as revelling in ‘pomp and ceremony’ even to the extent of pomposity. The institution is a hot air balloon that needs pricking.

13. In decline: Some experienced watchers of parliament say it is not like the good old days. They have in mind a number of things, including debating styles. They look back fondly to the days when Sir Robert Menzies and others could debate well and knew how to speak from the floor. Some might also look back wistfully to the days of Jim Killen and Fred Daly who were renowned for their wit and wisdom. There is another angle to this notion of parliament in decline. In this view parliament is no longer attracting the best talent, perhaps due to low pay and media intrusions into privacy.

14. Weak: Academics frequently talk about parliament as weak because it has been captured by the executive (this is the reverse of number 1, showing that there is no consistency). This is probably the common academic perception with images such as parliament as a ‘sausage factory’ (David Lovell) frequently passed in to undergraduate students as an undisputed fact.

15. Laughing stock: Sex scandals and misbehaviour, sometimes even intra-parliamentary, make parliament a laughing stock. There have been too many recently (Cheryl Kernot-Gareth Evans; John Della Bosca; Troy Buswell; Mike Rann). So, too, do occasions when, in an abuse of parliamentary privilege, private

citizens or political opponents have been slandered by a certain Senator (Senator Heffernan on Michael Kirby and Julia Gillard). I might mention here also the awful 'Do you know who I am?' syndrome (Belinda Neal).

Conclusion

The institution of parliament and its inhabitants are both admired and scorned. Perceptions are patchy. Human frailty often prevails among parliamentarians. Perhaps the good news is that many of the perceptions are not related to performance. Unfortunately that must mean too that the bad news is that improved performance may not mean improved perception of that performance. Parliament has problems of substance, but it also has a public relations problem that needs to be addressed. ▲