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**“Mr Speaker, I withdraw ...”: a comparative analysis  
of parliamentary standards over time via electronic  
*Hansard***

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## **“Mr Speaker, I withdraw ...”: a comparative analysis of parliamentary standards over time via electronic *Hansard***

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### *Abstract*

The question of parliamentary standards and parliamentarians' performances wells up from time to time in the public eye, fuelled by sometimes exaggerated media treatment but also by the theatrical posturing of certain parliamentary members themselves. While it might be expedient for those members not in government to point the finger of blame, making accusations of impropriety, Speaker-bias and 'arrogant disregard' for parliamentary conventions, is it actually the case that the governing party is more often (ir)responsible? Was Tony Fitzgerald right in claiming recently that "[political] ethics are always tested by incumbency"? Or is, as some might suspect, one side of politics more prone to lowering the standards of parliament than another? This paper showcases instances of 'improper' and 'unbecoming' behaviour by members of parliament, presenting a comparison between standards exhibited over several years in both the Queensland and Western Australian Legislative Assemblies, as well as their federal counterpart, the Commonwealth House of Representatives. This objective was pursued via the online search facilities of the Queensland, Western Australian and Commonwealth Parliament websites, accessing the electronic transcripts of *Hansard* in each case. Examples of un-parliamentary behaviour were identified using the simple search term, "Mr Speaker I withdraw", indicating the making and forced retraction of comments deemed 'not befitting a member of the House'. The search results were categorised and tabulated numerically, presenting the findings in revealingly empirical fashion. In so doing, the paper shows just which side of the chamber – Coalition or Labor, incumbent government or disgruntled opposition – has more often crossed the boundary between robust parliamentary debate and cheap, political point-scoring. It also answers the question of whether most withdrawals are elicited from so-called 'serial offenders'. Further, by sheer weight of numbers it illustrates whether parliamentary standards of behaviour have improved or deteriorated over this time.

### *Introduction*

The issue of parliamentary standards and the conduct – unbecoming or otherwise – of state and federal members of parliament elicits regular media criticism. The public's elected representatives are portrayed as blatantly and repeatedly overstepping the bounds of what is meant to pass for acceptable standards of behaviour in our nation's parliaments. For good or bad, those standards are then the subject of episodic review and reinforcement, in a supposedly contrite effort by governments to restore some order and public faith in the rarefied institution that is parliament.<sup>1</sup> However, as far as much of the public is concerned, these efforts amount to little more than another 'quick fix' for the government in question. As Liz Cunningham, long-time Independent state member for Gladstone in central Queensland, remarked recently in the Queensland Parliament, "there is a growing concern in the community about unethical behaviour ... this has been a growing concern over time no matter which party is in power. As [Tony] Fitzgerald observed, it happens the longer a political party appears to remain in power."<sup>2</sup> It might seem that, regardless of their political persuasion, governments should shoulder much of the blame for poor standards of behaviour – perceived or otherwise – in our parliaments. On the other hand, it is surely presumptuous to assert that governing parties contravene their parliaments' Standing Orders

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<sup>1</sup> In the last dozen years, all federal, state and territory parliaments have introduced variations of a Members' code of conduct, or at the least a Ministerial code, either in force or pending legislation. See Deirdre McKeown, "A survey of codes of conduct in Australian and selected overseas parliaments" (Background Note), Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, 26 November 2009, updated 17 December 2009, [www.aph.gov.au/Library/pubs/BN/pol/CodesOfConduct.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Library/pubs/BN/pol/CodesOfConduct.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Queensland Parliament website, *Record of proceedings: First session of the fifty-third parliament*, Wednesday, 25 November 2009, 3570, [www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard/documents/2009.pdf/2009\\_11\\_25\\_WEEKLY.pdf](http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard/documents/2009.pdf/2009_11_25_WEEKLY.pdf).

more often than their opponents, simply by virtue of being in government. Harold Macmillan, then British Prime Minister, said prior to the 1959 general election, “it is bad enough having to behave like a government when one is in power. The whole point of being in opposition is that one can have fun and lend colour to what one says and does.”<sup>3</sup> Is it incumbent upon the opposition, then, to push the accepted boundaries of parliamentary standards in holding the government to account?

With the recent advent in the nation’s federal, state and territory parliaments of electronic versions of the *Record of Proceedings* (known colloquially as *Hansard*), it is now a fairly straightforward task to gain an informed perception of the performance of members of our parliaments, without necessarily having to rely upon media coverage. It also makes the behaviour of our parliamentarians more immediately assessable. That being the case, this paper seeks to highlight those many instances of un-parliamentary behaviour where a member of the Lower House is invited (or more usually told) to withdraw a statement or comment in debate which is regarded as offensive and not befitting the House’s standards. Such adverse comments are recorded in various *Hansard* transcripts for everyone to see, and are now readily searchable for anyone with access to the internet. In so doing, it is hoped a clearer picture emerges of just which side of the chamber – government or opposition, Labor or Coalition – more often lowers the tone of parliamentary debate. The results of such searches are highly revealing, sometimes surprising and occasionally amusing. But more so, they underscore the modern transformation that digital technology has brought to parliamentary practices and reporting, and to the public’s perception of parliament itself.

Besides being an illustrative exercise in online parliamentary research, the main objective of this undertaking was to examine the recorded behaviour and language of state and federal parliamentarians as faithfully reported in their respective *Hansard* transcripts. To do so, the author accessed the *Hansard* web pages of the Queensland, Western Australian and Commonwealth Parliaments’ websites with a simple but targeted search term: ‘Mr Speaker, I withdraw’. The author’s customary obeisance to gender neutrality notwithstanding (something which cannot always be said of the nation’s parliamentarians), it was not felt necessary in this otherwise benign exercise to perform a search including the term ‘Madam Speaker’, since only one woman has ever held this office in the parliaments in question – in Canberra, as it happens – and that before the period of time under review here. This calculated endeavour would, it was hoped, illustrate the relative ease of extracting ‘revelatory’ information from the online versions of *Hansard*, as well as illuminating this relatively new path to the formation of public perceptions of our nation’s parliaments. In so doing, this modest research exercise achieves something more – it shines a spotlight squarely on the behaviour of our parliamentarians and shows that, over time and separated by no small distance, their standards of decorum have really altered very little (much like the public’s perception of the same).

## *Hansard Records*

Without question, *Hansard* has long been a great resource for the political or parliamentary researcher, making available the content (recorded faithfully if not word-for-word) and the broader context of the debates taking place in our nation’s Houses of Parliament. As such, it provides valuable insights to the day-to-day workings of governments and oppositions past and present, allowing for the formation of perceptions better informed than by government channels or standard media sources alone. It has now also become a thoroughly modern

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Macmillan, quoted in Richard Rose, *The problem of party government* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 289.

repository with the recent advent of electronic versions of *Hansard* across the nation. In Queensland, the parliament's informative website describes its origins and evolution thus:

The Queensland Parliament's *Hansard* reporting service was established in 1864 following allegedly unreliable newspaper reports of parliamentary proceedings. By 1878, the Queensland Parliament was the first Parliament in the world to have a daily official report of the debates without any form of government censorship. This was 31 years ahead of the House of Commons which first published its reports of debates in 1909. Today, the Parliamentary Reporting Service publishes transcripts of debates within two hours on the Parliament of Queensland website.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to the continuing digitisation of *Hansard* records, internet-savvy Queenslanders now have access not only to the recorded transcripts of their current parliamentarians' debates, but those of the state's earliest elected representatives. No doubt this has proved a timely and welcome addition to our archived political history, given the very recent marking of 150 years of separation and of parliamentary government in Queensland. Coincidentally, these early records bring to light the same concerns with parliamentary standards and behaviour as we share today, and that form the basis of this research exercise. As one of the state's original members put it to the House upon his appointment to the high office of Speaker:

I can only say that it will be my pride, study, and anxious desire to merit that support, without which I know that the authority of Speaker will be of little or no avail. Most of the members of this House are practically unacquainted with the forms and usages of Parliament, and liable in the heat of debate to make use of objectionable phrases. For that reason, I would urge on honourable members mutual forbearance and self-control, and the necessity of not taking exception to words and expressions which might bear a very different interpretation to that which at the time they might be disposed to attach to them. (Hear, hear.) From such causes might arise long and angry discussions, which on the commencement of the legislative career of this colony it would be wise to avoid. On such occasions if they arise, I will endeavour to steer an impartial course, and I hope, with the assistance of honourable members and firmness on my part to uphold the dignity of the House, to promote gentlemanly demeanour in all our debates. I will, as soon as possible, make myself acquainted with the laws and usages of Parliament, with a view of applying them to such circumstances as may arise.<sup>5</sup>

The relative inexperience of any new Speaker aside, it seems that 150 years later we still find in parliament the common use of 'objectionable phrases' and at times a distinct lack of 'gentlemanly demeanour'. Of course, it almost goes without saying that withdrawals and retractions in parliament are occasioned as much by the performance of the Speaker as by that of the members themselves. All the Standing Orders in the world are as nothing without an effectively impartial and conscientious 'umpire' to consistently apply them when it is most appropriate to do so. It follows, then, that the Speaker's performance and standing in the eyes of his or her parliamentary colleagues must necessarily be taken into account in any serious analysis of parliamentary standards looking at either side of the House. Interestingly, in both the Queensland and Western Australian Parliaments during the period under review,

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<sup>4</sup> Queensland Parliament website, "Record of Proceedings (Hansard): What is Hansard?", [www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard.asp](http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard.asp).

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Elliott, Esq., the first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, quoted from Queensland Parliament website, *Record of the proceedings of the Queensland parliament*, Tuesday, 22 May 1860, 5, [www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard/documents/1860/Asm/1860\\_05\\_22\\_A.pdf](http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/hansard/documents/1860/Asm/1860_05_22_A.pdf).

the Speaker (or Deputy Speaker in the former's case) on a single occasion felt compelled to withdraw his own 'offending' remarks in front of the chamber. What this did for the reputation of the Speakers involved, or for the general level of debate and acceptable standards in either House thereafter, is open to interpretation. For the record, both Speakers were Labor members of their respective parliaments, reacting to interjections ("saying stupid things") and criticisms from opposition members directed at the Chair.

In a similar way, when making inferences about changes in parliamentary standards over time, it is recognised that proper analysis would include reference to the extent and even influence of media coverage of House sittings in this period. For one thing, it might be anticipated that the level of this exposure (and what that means as regards the formation of public perceptions) had increased during this time, thanks in no small part to the modern proliferation of news media on the internet. It might also be expected that increased media coverage, in particular the live broadcasting of House sittings, would go some way towards changing the readily observed behaviour of parliamentarians. In addition, a more detailed analysis would of course take into account the political context of the period and the debates to which the inferences relate. Again, though, the scope of this exercise leaves such worthwhile scrutiny to others.

## *Findings*

The online repository of Queensland Parliament's *Hansard* covers the period from the first sitting of the first session of the 46<sup>th</sup> Parliament on 27 February 1990 (with Labor members on the government benches for the first time in over 32 years), up to the first session of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Parliament (last sitting prior to now on 11 June 2010). This period in total covers 921 days of parliamentary sittings for the Legislative Assembly – the solitary body in the state's unicameral legislature – in which 89 elected members sit. Each transcript of proceedings for every day of parliament's sittings in that time is fully searchable online, and all are accessible in both html format or as downloadable pdf documents. There are also digitised transcripts of the very first Queensland Parliament's sittings throughout 1860, including records for both the state's original Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council (later abolished in 1922).

The Western Australian Parliament's online *Hansard* – divided into records for the House of Representatives and for the Senate – covers a briefer period, from the first sitting of the first session of the 35<sup>th</sup> Parliament on 6 March 1997 up to the first session of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parliament (last sitting on 24 June 2010). This period covers 831 days of parliamentary sittings for the state's Legislative Assembly, in which 59 elected members currently sit (there were 57 seats in the Assembly prior to the general election of 6 September 2008). There have been only three different Speakers in the state's Lower House in all this time (not counting Deputy Speakers and Acting Speakers), the incumbent being the Hon. Grant Woodhams MLA. Each, typically, was elected to the office of Speaker from the ranks of the government of the day. Each transcript of proceedings for every day of parliament's sittings in that time is fully searchable and accessible in both html format or as downloadable pdf documents. By comparison, the corresponding period in Queensland's state legislature – going back to the parliament's first sitting date in 1997 (28 January) – covers only 596 days of sittings. In this time there have been five different Speakers in the state's parliament, the incumbent being the Hon. John Mickel MP.

The Commonwealth Parliament's *Hansard* – similarly divided into records for both Houses – has an online search facility that provides longer coverage of parliament's sittings from the first session of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Parliament on 24 February 1981, up to the first session of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament (last sitting on 24 June 2010, prior to this year's winter recess and with a new Prime Minister freshly installed on the government benches that very day). Going back to the

first sitting date in 1997 (4 February), this period covers 897 days of parliamentary sittings for the federal Legislative Assembly, in which 150 elected members currently sit (there were 148 seats in the Assembly prior to the general election of 10 November 2001). In this time there have been five different Speakers in the Commonwealth's Lower House, the incumbent being the Hon. Harry Jenkins, Jr. MP. Transcripts of the proceedings are accessible as pdf files from the most recent sitting date back to 30 April 1996; transcripts going further back to 1981 can be viewed only in html format. The full transcripts of each day's proceedings for both the Queensland and Commonwealth *Hansards* are available online by the evening of or morning after the previous day's sitting of parliament. In Western Australia, transcripts of *Hansard* are available online from the Friday (or following Monday at the latest) of each parliamentary sitting week. These unedited, or 'proof issue', transcripts of *Hansard* are later reproduced as a corrected *Weekly Hansard* (or *Official Hansard* in the Commonwealth's case), as well as being printed collectively in annual bound volumes.

While the basic search option of the Queensland Parliament's online search facility purports to look for the 'exact phrase' within *Hansard* transcripts, it is in fact less precise than that. Rather, the search locates passages in transcripts where the keywords of a phrase appear either consecutively or close to each other. As such, each identified 'proper' word of the search term – 'Speaker' or 'withdraw' in this case, and in that very order – is regarded as a single 'hit' in any given number of separate 'documents'. Each document represents a single parliamentary record for a particular date, in which more than one withdrawal might be recorded. According to parliament's digital transcripts, in that 13-plus-year timeframe since the first sitting date in 1997, *Hansard* records 216 hits for the search term, 'Mr Speaker I withdraw', across 85 separate documents. These results actually represent 108 instances of withdrawals being made by the 'offending parties'. The results, however, do not take into account all possible variations in a member's verbal delivery of their withdrawal. To expand, in the same period *Hansard* records 338 more hits across another 82 documents for the variant search term, 'I withdraw Mr Speaker'. In other words, the search keywords in either permutation are recorded a total of 554 times. When looking at the entire search phrase around these hits, this represents 277 instances of a member submitting to the Speaker's directive to withdraw their remark on 167 separate sitting days. This equates to roughly one withdrawal every two days of parliament's sittings in that time, the most recent of these being on 9 June of this year.

The Western Australian Parliament's online search facility presents a slightly more complex task in performing this same search, as it does not return any results whatsoever for the whole search term, 'Mr Speaker I withdraw'. It does, however, offer results after narrowing that search down to the phrase, 'I withdraw'. This, then, encompasses all instances in which a parliamentarian utters either variation of the search term as alluded to above: 'Mr Speaker I withdraw' and 'I withdraw Mr Speaker'. Hence, the results for these same twin search terms have been included in the cases of both the Queensland and Commonwealth *Hansards*. It is conceded that, in all probability, this approach excludes other variations of the search term and neglects other forms of members' withdrawals; however, it allows the search results to generate a suitably sizable sample and serves the measured scope of the research exercise. The Western Australian Legislative Assembly's *Hansard* records 501 'results' for this briefer search term across as many separate documents. In this case a single date may produce more than one document, and a single document may include more than one search result. This in fact represents 556 instances of a member's remark being withdrawn – examples of which *Hansard* helpfully denotes with the pre-emptive heading, "Withdrawal of Remark" – on 333 separate sitting days. While this is twice as many instances – and sitting days – a results show for the Queensland Parliament, it equates to roughly one withdrawal every 1½ days of parliament's sittings in that time, the most recent of these being on 24 June of this year.

The Federal Parliament's online search facility is, as one might expect, somewhat more user-friendly in this exercise. For a start, it locates the exact search phrase in its digital transcripts, and offers greater detail and opportunity to refine parameters in its advanced search mode. It is best, in this case, to bypass the basic search option and specify the Legislative Assembly's *Hansard* as the sole search target; otherwise, the results cover all available parliamentary records (including Committee reports, Senate documents, Bills, publications and the like) and literally run into the thousands. For the period under consideration here, the Commonwealth House of Representatives' *Hansard* records only 121 'matches' across as many separate documents for those same variant search terms. Again, a particular date may produce more than one document or match, and each match might contain more than one search result; a result signifies a single instance of the exact search term. This represents 137 instances of members' withdrawals – half as many again as in Queensland – occurring on 101 separate sitting days (or roughly one withdrawal every 6½ days of parliament's sittings in that time), the most recent of these being on 17 June of this year.

The raw numbers of withdrawals from these search results outlined above would seem to tell us – and quite conclusively – that Queensland's parliamentarians are twice as badly behaved as their federal counterparts in Canberra. Even clearer is the impression that members of Western Australia's Lower House (perhaps it should be relabelled the 'Lowest' House?) are twice as likely again to flout parliamentary standards as their Queensland cousins. But such perceptions are not really so conclusive, or are at least to some extent. When taking into consideration that Western Australia's Parliament sat on 235 more days than was the case in Queensland during the search timeframe, one can appreciate that there were simply more opportunities for un-parliamentary language and resultant withdrawals to occur. Of course, this cannot account for the fact that the Commonwealth House of Representatives sat on a further 66 days than this, and yet its recorded withdrawals totalled only one-quarter of Western Australia's. Given the much smaller number of elected members in their Legislative Assembly, it does not seem out of place to conclude from this that parliamentarians in the West really do 'punch above their weight'. In comparative terms, then, the results of this research exercise played out in the following fashion.

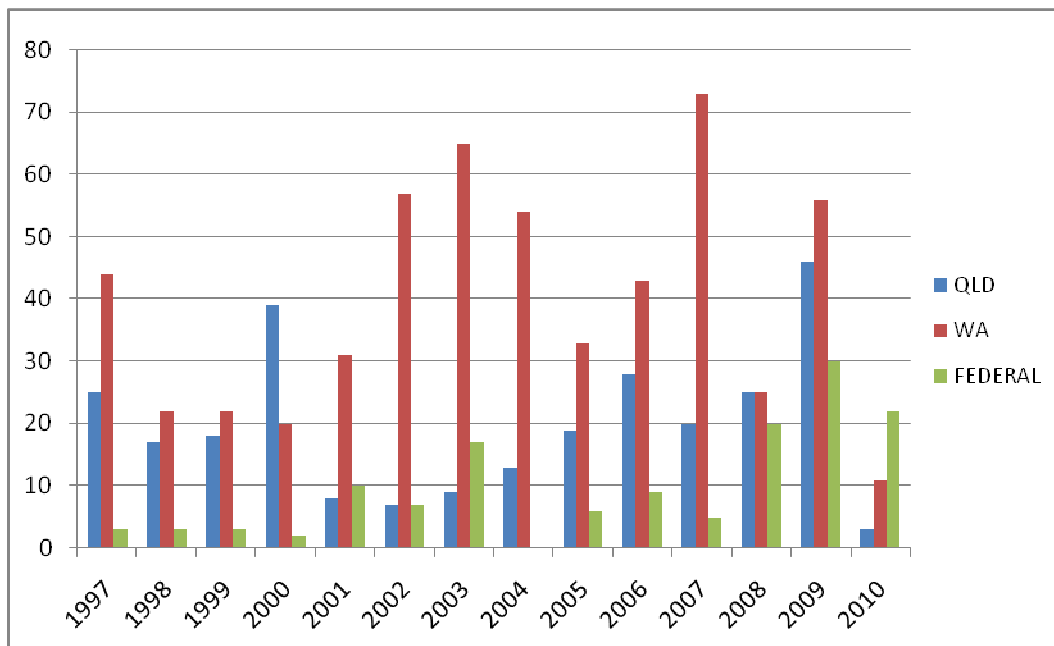


Figure 1: Number of withdrawals per year by parliament

In the Queensland Parliament, whose recorded withdrawals totalled 277 in the search period, incidences of un-parliamentary behaviour varied from year to year but remained relatively constant over that time. From 25 cases of withdrawn remarks in 1997, *Hansard* shows an identical number in 2008 before a peak of 46 in the following year. For the half-year to June 2010, there have been only three incidences; the only other time that withdrawals were in the single figures came in 2001 (8), 2002 (7) and 2003 (9). It would be no coincidence, surely, that these years correspond to the term of the second Beattie government, which won an overwhelming majority in the Legislative Assembly (taking 66 out of 89 seats) at the general election of 17 February 2001.<sup>6</sup> Plainly, the key to silencing dissent in the House and improving the standard of parliamentary conduct is to reduce your opposition to a tiny minority! As for Western Australia, whose withdrawals totalled 556, the spread of numbers was again varied but relatively constant. Besides the half-year to June 2010 (featuring 11 withdrawals), the least was recorded in 2000 (20), the last full year of the Court coalition government. Incidences of withdrawals progressed from 44 in 1997 to 56 in 2009, after peaking at 73 in 2007 – the year in which political fallout from the Corruption and Crime Commission inquiry undermined the government of Premier Alan Carpenter. At the other end of the scale, the Commonwealth's Legislative Assembly totalled only 137 withdrawals in the same period, but its records show a generally upwards trajectory of incidences over these years. From only three cases in 1997, numbers remained in single figures for all but two years while the Howard administrations were in power, including 2004 when there were no recorded withdrawals whatsoever (going by the search parameters outlined previously). Perversely, perhaps, these numbers have skyrocketed since Labor won office in November 2007, with a peak of 30 in 2009 between 2008 (20) and the half-year to June 2010 (22). What this says about the conduct of members from either side of the House, or in fact about the performance of Speakers from either party in 'controlling' the behaviour of members over this time is, again, open to interpretation.

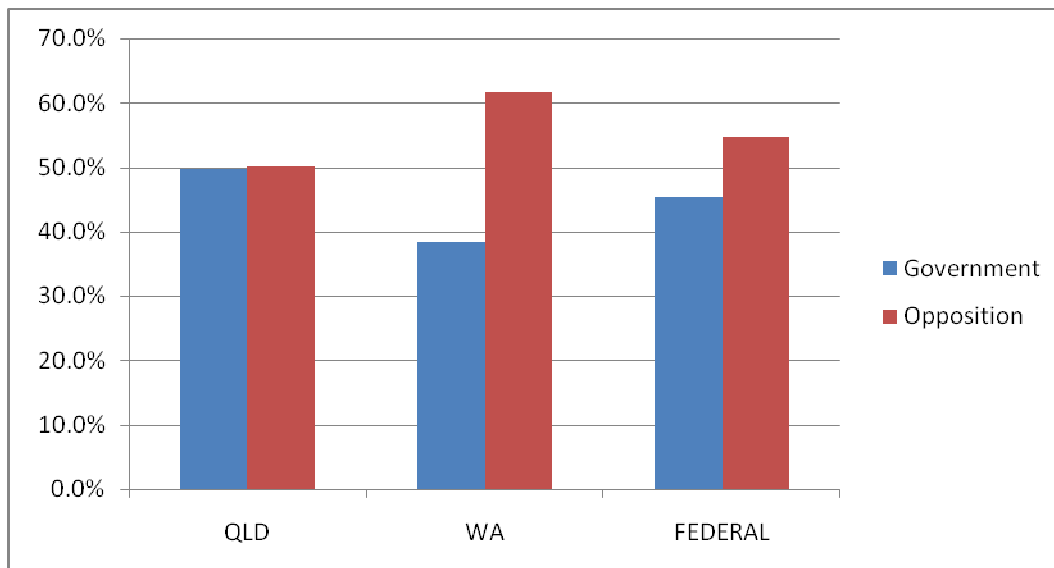


Figure 2: Percentage of total withdrawals by parliamentary status

Comparing instead the incidences of withdrawals by government as opposed to opposition members, the total numbers reflect a different and, indeed, more surprising story. Varying

<sup>6</sup> It might also reflect the amended parliamentary practices introduced through the Premier's 'Parliament of Queensland' Act, including the instigation of the Members' Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee. See McKeown, "A survey of codes of conduct".



opinions would have it that either an 'arrogant' incumbent government or a feisty, disgruntled opposition would show many more recorded withdrawals than their counterparts. However, in Queensland and in Canberra this patently was not the case. With the former, the number of withdrawn remarks was split almost evenly at 138 for government members and 139 for opposition members. Federally, it was a similar 'contest' with government members being responsible for 62 withdrawals (or roughly 45%) compared to the opposition responsible for 75. In Western Australia the difference was starker (and the results perhaps more true to 'type'), with just 213 withdrawals (around 38%) attributed to government members compared to the opposition's 343. It is worth noting that in Western Australia, unlike Queensland and Canberra where one ruling party governed for a great majority of the period under review, government has been held by both sides of politics for roughly an equal number of years.

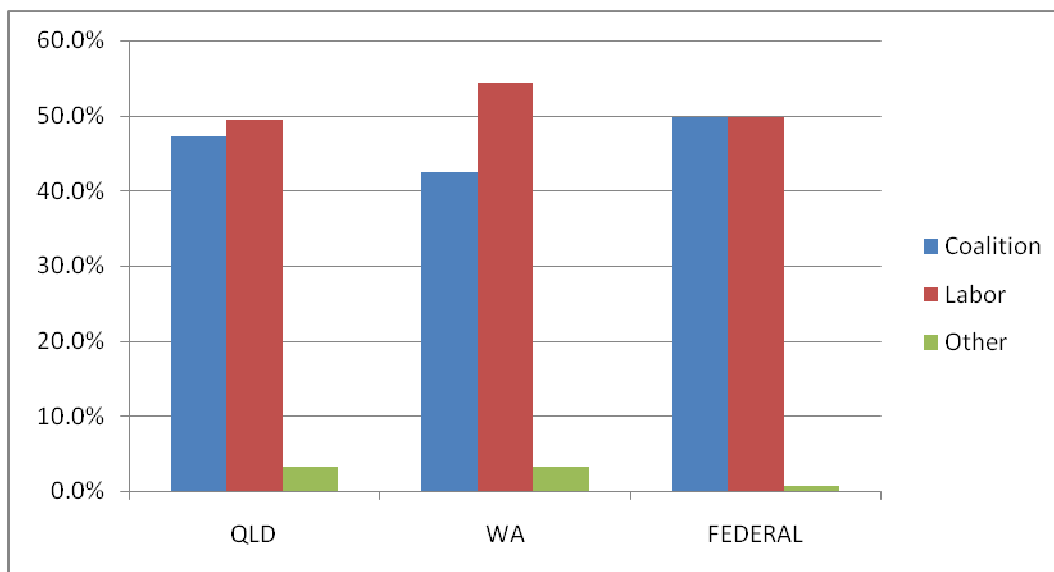


Figure 3: Percentage of total withdrawals by party

The search results become even more closely matched and accordingly informative when comparing incidences of withdrawals by party. In Queensland, ALP members were made to withdraw remarks on 137 occasions, while the Coalition parties withdrew 131 times (this comprises 88 for the Nationals, 15 for the Liberals and 28 for the recently merged entity, the LNP). Nine withdrawals were attributed to Independents or to members of small minority parties, all of whom it could be argued are cut from the conservative cloth (being mostly One Nation members or ex-members), thereby making the totals closer yet at 137 versus 140. The Commonwealth figures were, incredibly, even closer than this. The ALP recorded 68 withdrawals compared to exactly the same number for the Coalition (67 by Liberals, and a solitary withdrawal by a National member); there was also a single withdrawal by a lone Independent. In Western Australia, again, the difference in numbers was clearer, with the ALP responsible for 302 withdrawals (roughly 54%) compared to 236 for the Coalition parties (225 for the Liberals and only 11 for the Nationals). A further 17 withdrawals were made by Independents, with a solitary withdrawal made by the former Greens' member for Fremantle (now an Independent following revelations of a cross-benches 'alliance' of sorts).

Finally, the search results threw up the names of several members of the respective federal and state parliaments, some of whom it became apparent could be termed 'serial offenders' in making un-parliamentary remarks. They stood out more clearly and much more often than others in the offenders 'hit list'. In Queensland, former Leader of the Opposition and National (now LNP) member, Jeff Seeney, topped the list with 24 withdrawals, followed from amongst

his own ranks by another former party leader, Lawrence Springborg, with 16. On the 'other side', former Premier, Peter Beattie, accumulated 23 withdrawals over this period, followed by current Minister, Rob Swarten, with 18 (and current Premier, Anna Bligh, was not to be left out of the running with 10 withdrawals). In Canberra, the Liberals' Christopher Pyne is clearly most prone to unseemly comments, having made 16 withdrawals. The closest to him is current Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, and current Deputy Prime Minister, Wayne Swan, both 'scoring' 9 withdrawals. Even the former and current Prime Ministers rated highly in this regard, with Kevin Rudd making 7 and Julia Gillard 6 withdrawals respectively. But we have to move further west to find the serious offenders. From Labor's ranks, former Minister, Alannah MacTiernan, leads the pack after making 37 withdrawals over a parliamentary career covering the whole search timeframe (and having retired only in the last fortnight). Behind her were placed former Minister, Jim McGinty, with 31 and former Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, with 21 withdrawals. This number was matched from the Liberals' ranks by former party leader and state Treasurer, Troy Buswell, with 21, who is bettered by another former party leader, Paul Omodei, with 36 withdrawals. It is the current Premier of Western Australia, however, who takes the cake in this 'shame file' of members to whom most withdrawals are attributed: The long-time Liberal leader, Colin Barnett, recorded a 'grand' total of 73 withdrawn remarks over the 13½-year duration of the search timeframe. Premier Barnett might 'withdraw' to consider those numbers over this parliamentary winter recess ...

## Conclusion

This research exercise, besides highlighting the rich repository of the online *Hansard* public record, has established a number of inferences which can be drawn from the search results. Chief among them is that, over the time period under review here, there have been a great many instances of parliamentarians making and withdrawing crude, improper remarks. This recorded behaviour would probably fit the public's perception of 'misbehaving' politicians; however, what does not fit so easily is that, generally, the results were fairly even between the parties and from one side of the chamber to the other (besides the clear exception in Western Australia). This could mean that, despite popular opinion, politicians of whatever stripe are (comparatively speaking) not so badly behaved after all – or that, as the popular adage has it, they are just as bad as each other. This might also indicate that, over time, there has been mostly effective, consistent supervision of the Houses of Parliament by a succession of Speakers from both sides. Even if this were the case, it would seem that parliamentarians are becoming harder to supervise. Overall, the apparent trend is that unparliamentary behaviour – if the making of withdrawals is anything to go by – is increasing, instead of getting better over time. Despite well publicised efforts to impose better codes of conduct and standards of behaviour in parliaments across the nation, the unseemly language is anything but improved from days past. The lion's share of withdrawn remarks would, at best, be classed as name-calling – "hypocrite" would rate as the derogatory term du jour across all parliaments, followed closely by "fool" and "moron". Similarly, the Speaker of the Western Australian Parliament had to rule more than once on the permissibility of referring to opposing House members as creatures of the four-legged, flying or marine variety. Perhaps, as it is suggested, geography really does play a large part in human development (politicians included), and that distant, western state operates under its own set of standards.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, despite the poor perception all this likely engenders in the outside observer, the last question this exercise poses is this: does the public really care? Or would they in fact be disappointed – and presumably Harold MacMillan among them – if our parliaments were not home to the 'colourful repartee' which we seem to value in so many of our public performers?

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<sup>7</sup> See Jeremy Moon and Campbell Sharman, eds., *Australian politics and government: the Commonwealth, the states and the territories* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Ch. 8, "Western Australia", 183-208.

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