

Preferential Roles of MPs on Parliamentary Committees[#]

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Abstract

Parliamentarians owe a duty to wider institutions such as the parliament, the constituency body and their respective political parties. But what roles do they like to play in the parliament and does the parliamentary committee provide a habitat within which their preferred role can be deployed? To answer these questions 62 parliamentarians in three houses (the House of Representatives, the Senate and the ACT Legislative Assembly) were observed as they conducted public inquiries. Afterwards, observations about their behaviour on these inquiries were reviewed during interviews with 61 of these members. This paper presents a range of preferential role types based on the data collected. Contrary assumptions underpinning each of the role types create tensions between competing views about the behaviour that is appropriate to parliamentary committees and in particular the uses to which they should be put.

In recent decades parliamentary committees have emerged as institutions into which parliamentarians' energies are channelled. Halligan, Power and Miller (2001) demonstrate that there has been a dramatic increase in committee productivity over the past decade as indicated by the number of committee reports produced. In a separate study (2007) they show that the number of committees upon which the typical parliamentarian is engaged had increased from zero-to-one in the 1970s to three-to-five by the turn of the century. They conclude that parliamentarians feel pressure from their party structures to take a fair share of the ever increasing burden and often see committee work as part of their career plans. This paper is based on a close examination of the working lives of parliamentarians in the context of their committee work and shows them to exercise a significant degree of self determination, which is nonetheless mediated by their responses to pressures and incentives emanating from other institutions within the parliament. Unlike the rest of the workforce, each member of parliament comes to work armed with a separate,

[#] This article has been double blind refereed to full academic standards

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individual mandate. They have authority to act and to determine their own role. The analysis here is based on the concept of the 'preferential role', which is the role parliamentarians like to play after having taken into account a range of obligations and balancing these against political judgement and personal preferences and interests. While parliamentarians certainly feel the pressure of work and the demands of superordinate institutions, their responses in the interviews that were a part of this study show that they are able to reflect in a detached manner on the meaning and purpose of this work and to fashion a role which becomes personally meaningful.

Most studies that look at Australian parliamentary life acknowledge the dominance of the executive and the party (Lewis and Coghill 2005 provide a survey), but seek to examine how parliamentarians operate within this grand constraint. With some individual exceptions MPs gain a genuine satisfaction for their work, particularly their committee work (Coghill and Lewis 2004). Some even characterise committee work as a safe haven from the hurley burley that occurs on the floor of parliament. This idea of the committee as retreat is ennobled as a parliamentary ideal in the following quotation from the current edition of Odgers' Senate Practice.

It is in the conference [i.e. committee] room that careful, calm consideration can be brought to bear upon a subject, and [senators] can work harmoniously in spite of party differences. It is there that the qualities and experience of the individual can be applied to matters under discussion. It is there that opportunity is provided for vision, judgment and experience to be applied and, later, brought before the Senate for open discussion and action. (Chairman of the Select Committee on the Standing Committee System, Senator R D Elliott, SD, 14/5/1931, pp 1912–3)

While some members identify with this ideal, the statement represents an overly narrow characterisation of the qualities of committee life. The committee provides opportunities for members to play a variety of parliamentary roles. Moreover as those roles are asserted the behavioural nature of the committee-as-a-collective changes in response. Committees are what the members make them. They are constructed and reconstructed according to interpretations by their members as to what they must do in the circumstances. These conclusions are based on a study that tracked 62 members through 10 inquiries in three houses of parliament: the Australian Senate, the House of Representatives and the ACT Legislative Assembly.

The theoretical perspective of the study is located within the *new institutionalism* of March and Olsen (1984, 1994). The primary interest of the new institutionalism is to identify the norms of behaviour that reflect the reality of the institution rather than its idealised form. To observe different real life approaches to institutional life, this study examined ten parliamentary inquiries. The selection of inquiries was made in consultation with the parliamentary departments that service the committees in each house. The aim of this consultation was to identify a range of inquiries which would represent the full range of typical encounters. The sample is too small and the committees too varied to claim to be representative of any particular approach to parliamentary work. The aim was rather to provide

observation on as many different types of committee experience as possible so that observation could capture the breadth of the roles performed. Having watched the members in action, the aim in interviews was to probe their explanations for their own behaviour, to identify what they wanted to get from the experience, what they see as the significance of committee work and whether they try to refashion the committee encounter so that it better serves their own objectives.

The sample is not random across the parliament. The selection of members for interview was determined by the inquiries chosen. If the MP played any role in the public hearings, s/he got an invitation to be interviewed. While the study does not pretend to be representative, Halligan's work suggests that few members can escape the issues thrown up by the committee system. Moreover the members who took part in this study see this role as significant enough to want to talk about it. All but one participant in the ten inquiries observed accepted the invitation to interview. Only one of the members who were interviewed regarded committee work as not worth the effort of serious academic study.

One of the advantages in looking at three separate parliaments is the ability to seek linkages between the role prescriptions members identify and those institutionalised structures that differ from house to house. For example, differing electoral systems for the three houses studied might be expected to provide a set of institutionalised incentives for correspondingly different behaviour. The Hare Clark electoral system in the ACT and the state wide proportional representation of the Senate reduces the electoral visibility of members compared to their counterparts in the House of Representatives. Such influences of the electoral system on choices were embedded in the explanations from members about the formative influences on the roles that they prefer to play.

Other researchers have developed role types that apply in parliaments outside of Australia. Wahlke et al. (1962) examined selected human qualities that affect the nature of relationships between legislators. In particular, Wahlke's analysis establishes attributes that enable committee chairs to play out their roles effectively. Effectiveness is defined in managerial terms as an ability to get the bill through. Wahlke's typology of roles includes descriptors that largely speak for themselves: the ritualist (procedural expert), the tribune (advocate of popular concerns), the inventor (i.e. of policy choices) and the broker. Wahlke finds that the brokerage role of the legislator is generally the most salient in the US context (p. 266).

In Searing's (1994) work on the parliament at Westminster there is no hierarchy of personal orientations, simply a mapping of the orientations themselves. There are no normative criteria for effectiveness; only a desire to treat the members motives as worthwhile in themselves. Nonetheless, the role descriptions are remarkably similar to those identified by Wahlke et al three decades before: the parliament man (cf the ritualist) the constituency man (cf the tribune), the policy advocate (cf the inventor). Searing's 'ministerial aspirant' has no direct equivalent in Wahlke et al.'s typology, but this might be attributed to the difference between a Westminster and a

congressional institutional structure.¹ Searing's work is self consciously sociological and of central importance here because it creates the concept of the preferential role, which is the focus of this particular study. Unfortunately, Searing fails to take the next logical step of considering how the interactions between member's preferences could create a collective action that might reconstruct the wider parliamentary institution.

In order to draw clear distinctions between the types of roles members play, a typology of preferential roles is drawn below reflecting what members said about parliamentary life and how they see the place of committee work in it. In constructing interviews the typologies of Wahlke and Searing were not used to construct specific questions. Instead, all members were asked about the role they preferred to play in parliament, their objectives and operational styles. Then the questions became more contextualised to the inquiry that had been observed. The major focus of the interviews was to work inductively from the behaviour that had been observed, probing about the meaning and purpose that the MP attributed to his/her own behaviour. In addition, all members were asked how they see the significance of such committee work to the role they preferred to play in parliament. The typology thus reflects the differing assumptions among the members about politics and parliament that was apparent in analysis of the interview transcripts.

The identification of individual members with one role type should not be taken to mean that members can only operate from one role, but rather that they prefer to operate in a particular role when circumstances give them the option. In general, they have an intuitive and tacit understanding of alternative roles and the assumptions that drive them. This understanding enables them to do business with representatives of other types, but also on occasion to construct criticisms and even chaff at the constraints imposed by non-preferential roles. The distribution of members by role is provided at Table 1 below. The views of parliamentary life that they promote are summarised at Table 2.

The Parliamentarian

Parliamentarians are members who see parliamentary processes as having an inherent value that is worth promoting and preserving. Of all the types, the *parliamentarian* has the strongest conception of parliamentary sovereignty and places most value on the functions that arise: e.g. representation, accountability, conflict resolution, deliberation etc. Most recognise the realities of cabinet government, but assert the importance of the parliament to governance. They also understand the realities inherent in the party system, but advocate a flexible, open-

¹ It may be worth examining as a sub-species in the US those members who aspire to run for president and who tailor their behaviour accordingly. In 2008 Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama makes excellent examples.

minded approach because they believe that harnessing the resources of the parliament is important if the best policy prescriptions are to be found.

If you're in a party . . . you know that you've got certain policy positions. But if you can come through that process with an outcome where you have actually achieved something positive then you've achieved a huge amount. If you walk in with a mind set knowing what your view is and not being prepared to change, then I don't know why you are bothering. (House of Reps Committee Chair)

They express their sense of duty to the parliament:

By being elected as an MP you take on responsibilities. Part of that responsibility is to help the parliament work. An equal responsibility is to accept the workload. If members don't contribute, they are not fully discharging their responsibilities. (MHR committee member A)

Parliamentarians are aware that party decision-making militates against deliberative decision-making, but they seek some opportunities for the parliament to operate in a deliberative manner, despite the party system. They point out that most bills are non partisan in nature in as much as the position taken does not confer a political advantage with the electorate. One way of operating in the preferred non-partisan, deliberative fashion is to leave party-political issues to others and gravitate to those matters that both lend themselves to a bipartisan approach and have strong possibilities for finding solutions.

I think you're wasting your time getting into adversarial issues. They will only be fought out in the same way on the floor of parliament. You add more value by choosing issues that can be explored and resolved through the committee system. (Senate committee member A)

It would be easy to mistake *parliamentarians* as being concerned with process for its own sake. However, the way members conceive of their role is intertwined with their concept of the institution. A member of the ACT Assembly demonstrates that even the most ritualistic process can have a strategic importance to the *parliamentarian*:

Rituals are pretty important to the authority of the Assembly. In the Australian federation, the States and Territories are highly unequal in size, wealth and power. The maintenance of authority becomes important if small states are to compete in the highly competitive arena of inter-governmental forums. So in the Assembly committee we have a forum which provides informality, whereas the chamber must be formal. (ACT MLA A)

The point here is that there is pressure for the ACT Legislative Assembly to act like a parliament lest it be relegated to the secondary status of a council and its political authority be diminished as a consequence. This particular *parliamentarian* services the institution by protecting and promoting the processes that make it a parliament, rather than, say, a corporatist hierarchy. *Parliamentarians* are concerned to preserve the institution's dignity and authority. They share the parliamentary values relating

to deliberation and openness, but advocate these values partly because they wish to maintain public confidence and respect for the institution.

A member of the House of Representatives expressed a similar sentiment about his role as a guardian of the reputation of the parliament.

I'm trying to convey decorum, gravitas (and) intelligence. I don't want the parliament to look like a bunch of yahoos. I don't want the people to think that politicians are people with their snouts in the trough and don't provide value.
(MHR committee member B)

The general tenor of many of the above quotations is consistent with a focus on appropriate behaviour and a tendency to judge the worth of a member against a set of parliamentary behavioural ideals.

The Constituency Servant

A constituency might be generally thought of as those people who reside in the members' respective electorates. However in proportionally represented houses it also could be considered to be a sub-group of the electorate with a distinct interest. A public choice theorist might describe such a sub-group as a market segment. Halligan, Millar and Power (2007) have spotlighted the way in which Senate committees tend to address themselves to the interests of policy communities, which implies a view of the constituency as being composed of these professional elites rather than the voters themselves. In houses that are elected by proportional representation, members lament their low recognition factors, especially in the Senate where the Senators are aware that most people from their states could not name their Senators, much less vote for them as individuals. Constituency might also include the interest group or groups within the party that provided the amount of pre-selection votes necessary for the member to achieve a winnable position on the party's preference ticket. Not surprisingly, Table 1 locates most *constituency servants* within the House of Representatives, the only house of the three studied that represents single member electorates.

Some *constituency servants* construct a role as service providers. The examples of service that they give break down into two broad categories. The first group might be described as interventions to help constituents resolve their personal problems with governance, which is to say the political, judicial, public service, contractors and not-for-profit deliverers of public goods and services. The second form of service could be described as the generation of a more favourable distribution of the common wealth towards their own electorate.

One member told the following anecdote to illustrate the way in which he prefers to work, 'I had an 84 year-old man who'd got a parking fine from a meter so I fixed it. I rang the mayor. I said "If you don't forgive this fine I'll pay it myself". I fixed it.'
(MHR committee member C)

Another member described an exercise in niche-marketing:

I've got a new person working for me. She speaks two Torres Strait Island languages. She's a full time representative on the Islands. I like to be hands on. . . . My electorate office is a one-stop shop. A lot of local people don't like dealing with white officers. She's getting a great deal of work. (MHR committee member D)

Another interpretation of service to the constituency is as the provision of new goods and services. This is a distributive service, which is expressed in the generation of new public works, policy interventions favourable to local industry etc:

I got together an Infrastructure Strategy Program: I got a childcare centre, a dam, an airport. I've got all these things except the airport and that's coming. I've got a strategy. How many MPs would have that? (MHR committee member E)

There is a sense that the *constituency servant* wants to leave a legacy, to be remembered by a grateful community for his or her contribution:

If I'm out of politics at the next election, I can say I made a difference during the short time I was here. I'd love to get back in but I'm realistic. I put all my efforts in here. I never went overseas or had a holiday during the break, like all the other MPs did; I stayed in the electorate. I think the people know that I work hard for them. (MHR committee member F)

This quotation represents a strong work ethic which links hard work with moral worthiness and hence desert. At a slightly deeper level the quotation also represents the speaker's conception of his own self-interest, which requires him to be seen to deliver and to have been the instrument of that delivery by the constituents.

Many constituency-focused members describe themselves as 'representatives'. One notion of constituency representation is embodied in the conception of the MP as the instrument of the people in the constituency. However concepts of representation vary. Some picture themselves as being in consultation with their constituents. They keep the parliament in touch with real people by reality testing ideas and finding out what people want.

Some members describe their role as 'taking the parliament to the people'. A slightly more complex (i.e. two-way) relationship is expressed in the commonly used phrase a 'bridge between the people and government'. These are parliamentary cliches, but members choose to identify with their essential messages about function. A more sophisticated way of interpreting this role is that the *constituency servant* adds value by structuring community views into the form of arguments and presenting them to government, acting at once as a filter and an interpreter:

We are trying to bring communities into a round table situation. Everything I wrote in the report reflects the view of someone who made a submission. The report is structured by peoples' views. (Senate committee member B)

This *constituency servant* processes the views of the constituency into a form that is likely to impress points of executive decision-making, such as Cabinet members or senior public servants.

Others conceptualise representation in a similar way to some of the *parliamentarians* by asserting that their election proves the ‘representativeness’ of their person and allows them to proceed on the basis of their own judgment:

As a parliamentarian I have a role as an advocate for the people I represent. This is a *representative* role not a *delegated* role. As a delegate you act on behalf of and at direction of another group. As a representative you simply apply your judgment in representing their views. (MHR committee member G)

When pressed, members will acknowledge that the people voted for the values associated with the party label, but when these members speak of representation, they refer to their vote as a personal vote, implying a deeper belief in a personal mandate.

Some members attempt to project themselves as an artefact or microcosm of the constituency. They see their function in the parliament as ensuring that executive members and colleagues see the people of the electorate when they look upon the MP: ‘I grew up with a Torres Strait Islander family. I was their white son. So I have a good understanding of the people.’ (MHR committee member D)

Because of the importance they place on identity these MPs tend to draw a picture of what they are when they discuss their roles. Constituency embodiment also suggests that the member remains part of the constituency and may even disassociate himself (herself) from the institutions of parliament or party. Like *parliamentarians*, *constituency servants* tend to characterise themselves as being ‘pragmatic’ by which they mean that they are not driven by ideology.

The Partisan

Partisans are members who see their role within the parliament as advancing the status and influence of their particular party. They rationalise their role by arguing that on balance the people will be better off under their own party, and so the best thing they could do for the common good is to ensure that the party achieves and maintains power. Implicit in this mission statement is the prediction that *partisans* would mainly develop within parties that have a reasonable chance of attaining government (i.e. the larger parties), and this in fact proves to be the case. However *partisans* also exist in minor parties which seek to build themselves into larger parties and may see a long-term future as a governing party.

This is not to say that electoral victory sees the end of the *partisan’s* toils. They have a relationship with the electorate but it is interpreted in terms of their duty to the party. That duty is to maintain and improve the confidence that the constituents

have in them as a member so that they can again fulfil the primary purpose at the following election by making the seat safer for the party. *Partisan* expressions of identity are characterised by strong group identification. They do not have an individual role but rather a collective role. Wins are expressed as wins for the team. Individual strategy is not referred to as often as collective strategy.

Partisans operate at one or both of two levels. At one moment they may either adopt the profile of the party functionary in parliament, or the persona of the party warrior focused on combat with the opposing forces on the floor. The focus when in the role of manager, is inwards towards the quiet management of internal party matters. The aim is to keep the party's good name by managing its internal issue resolution processes so that conflict does not break into the public sphere. 'Disunity is death.' Those who find themselves wanting to play this sort of low-profile managerial role are sensitive to the fact that their role offers little that their individual electorate is likely to recognise and value. They recognise the need not to be seen as 'organisational heavies' or 'number crunchers'.

While the *partisan* understands, accepts and observes hierarchies within the party, the good of the whole is a leveller. No one is above the team. As one Coalition member said:

Cabinet doesn't worry me. I'm more worried about the integrity of party policy. Generally party solidarity is pretty important. We've had a little trouble with our leader recently. Making statements publicly which are outside of the party platform. But he has been warned by the membership and I think things will be OK. (Senate committee member C)

If the parliament is a theatre, the *partisan* would claim that the party runs ensemble productions: i.e. all members of the troupe are equal, but it makes sense to put your best performers up front. When *partisans* are pursuing their objectives in public they are often more inclined to express their partisanship using the language of combat. S/he looks for forums where the combative advantage is greatest. In speaking of committee work one said:

I've got to be pretty careful how I spend my time on them. But 'estimates' is pretty useful for gathering the knowledge base. Information gathered is not just used in assessing estimates; it can be used on an ongoing basis. You might get a few hits on the government. In estimates you can do almost anything. (Senate committee member D)

Partisans do not regard committee work as of high priority unless it can be turned towards the key issues that separate the parties. In general, they prefer to devote themselves to internal party committees, where the discussion centres more on tactics and less on policy than is the case with the open parliamentary committees. They have little time for non-public forums that engage with members of other parties since a hit against the other side in a private forum will not translate to a reduction in the opponent's public credibility. For this reason they elevate the

importance of committee inquiries into budget estimates and relegate other inquiries.

Partisans demonstrate a developed interest in party processes and speak authoritatively when conveying that knowledge. The *partisan* only needs to understand policy to the extent that it becomes the prize over which the battle is being fought, but s/he does not need to know too much of the art of policy development. Policy knowledge only becomes important when raising the personal profile to broaden the support base or gain promotion:

I see myself as having a front bench role in the distant future: so here is a chance to learn about legislative processes and develop skills. I need practice in the formulation of questions that you can ask and how I ask them. I came up thorough the party machine. You need to organise an election and I'm your man, but I haven't thought too much about policy for a long time. (MHR committee member H)

The Policy Specialist

The *policy specialist* defines his/her role as the pursuit of a particular policy or policy area. The *policy specialist* may have a personal interest in the policy or may see policy as a response to particular pressing problems. They define themselves in reference to these issues:

I'm also very interested in banking issues. I'd hoped to get into some of that on this committee. Banking charges are getting out of hand. It's just terrible the way they treat people. (MHR committee member I)

Here the case is made for government intervention as a response to the specific problem of the imbalance of power between banks and citizens and the treatment meted out as a result. Where *parliamentarians* try to make parliament into an efficient vehicle for managing a range of problems, the *policy specialists* have a focus on the particular problem. They tend to explain their coming to parliament as the best vehicle for pursuing the issue rather than as an end in itself.

The *policy specialist* tries to keep the focus of work narrow in line with the need to spend resources developing specialist expertise and dealing with a specific area of policy in depth. They have a sense of the policy area as a discipline and point to specific influences in the past where they developed their disciplinary knowledge. Often the source of disciplinary knowledge is in an occupation or profession that they pursued before their political career:

I'm an accountant. I've always worked with the Certified Practising Accountants and I've always been interested in managerial type issues, issues of financial management. I am the Minister assisting the Treasurer and I enjoy that work very much. (MLA committee member B)

These kinds of disciplinary defined roles also include the law and finance. Topic area experts identify together, even across party lines. During interviews the

recognised experts on superannuation in each of the parties at the national level separately characterised each other as part of that parliament's single store of expertise. The lawyers also tend to maintain their professional identity, even in cases where they have had many years in the parliament:

Lawyers! A pox on them, but you can't do without us. It helps being a criminal lawyer. You've got to have an overall objective and you've got to be objective. Criminal lawyers are a special breed. (MHR committee member J)

In these cases the disciplinary background carries a body of technical knowledge that appeared to give the proponents a sense of empowerment. Some *policy specialists* define their role by describing their activity in managing their policy agenda. This policy activism suggests that they see a role for themselves in policy advocacy.

Advocacy for them is an exercise in political management. The discourse of the *policy specialist* is full of discussion of strategy and tactics, the essential question being that of how to alter government policy. If not in government the *policy specialist* is an agenda manager, who promotes a form of governance from the backbenches. This role has more to offer independents than major parties whose members need only keep the issue hot within the party and await the next swing of the electoral pendulum. In the major parties, agenda management activity operates within the party room; it is sufficient to develop acceptance of the agenda within the party and then await a stint in government.

Policy specialists, who wish to actualise their roles by managing an agenda, must develop the most complex and diffused web of personal inter-relationships of all the types. The most active *policy specialists* look and sound like lobbyists. They must operate by connecting high-quality sources of policy information with decision-makers. In constructing their relationships, they need to locate themselves at the centre of a web, which connects those with policy-relevant information and sources of executive power.

The Political Theorist

The *political theorist* is a member who refers extensively to theory in explaining his or her own behaviour. The *theorist* is highly reflective in some cases to the point of being academic in orientation. S/he draws distinctions between the general run of politicians who refer to an external source of guidance such as a party platform and those 'more evolved' members who develop responses to circumstances on the basis of rational and coherent thought:

I think very few politicians have attempted to set out for themselves a philosophical background as to what they are doing. Many would say 'Yes, but I do what the party says. I have a Labor philosophy' or whatever. But Labor philosophy didn't come out of thin air and so they don't know how to go back to first principles in terms of their philosophy and I think that is quite sad. (MLA committee member C)

The *theorist* constructs his or her role directly from theory. Theory becomes a basis for both action and identity. Hence the theory and the role become one, with the member trying to embody both the theoretical principles and the persona of the theoretician.

The *theorist* values intellect and intellectual rationality. S/he spends time deconstructing the arguments of opponents and exposing principles and assumptions to analysis as a means of attacking the integrity of the argument. *Political theorists* tend to express the view that a better grasp of theory and contemplation of theory will lead to higher quality action. The member quoted immediately above went on to argue:

... because if they did [i.e. think about their philosophy], I think there would be times when they would cross the floor and they would realise that the party is going off the rails, that there are higher principles upon which to base things and make sure that the pragmatic doesn't take over. (MLA committee member C)

The *theorist* disdains the pragmatism that characterises the other types. S/he also distinguishes between theory and ideology. Ideology drives other kinds of politicians. Ideology is unthinking and uncritical and therefore dangerous; part of the *theorist's* role is to attack and discredit ideologies:

Political correctness has been an enormous blight on Australia. Political correctness supports economic rationalism. That is because economic rationalism is not a theory, it's a political ideology. It's a new kind of political correctness. (MHR committee member K)

Theorists might take positions opposed to the current institutional structure but they are far from anti-institutionalist in their political analysis. Those who wish to play an activist role are able to construct in their imagination the ideal institutional structure, which would express and reinforce their preferred way of operating. Those who are also activists can be expected to offer a critique that supports changes to the institution that would be more favourable to their agenda. A *theorist's* notions of consultative and deliberative decision-making are here presented as an agenda for parliamentary reform:

... The Greens have a difficulty with the adversarial system, taken to the extreme that it is in politics and it's also, I believe why you don't get as many women entering and staying in politics. And also people, different kinds of people, because it is a very threatening and hostile environment. (Senate committee member E)

For minor parties such arguments mark a happy coincidence between personal conviction and political necessity, since parliamentary reform designed to reduce adversarial behaviour would probably attack the two-party system and hence would also enhance their personal influence.

Theorists can find themselves at odds with the wider social unit, whether it is the party or the parliament. Their rejection of current forms and norms can isolate them from others who support collective decision-making and disapprove of individual

political agitation, such as the partisans or the parliamentarians. They are often criticised by colleagues as mavericks.

A caveat that needs to be put on any further definition of this role type is that the sample from which generalisations are inferred is quite small. As Table 1 demonstrates, there were only five members in this study who could be identified primarily as political theorists. It is their distinctiveness from the other types that supports their inclusion as a separate category. Their inclusion is necessary if the typology is to be comprehensive, because they cannot be subsumed under another type.

Table 1 provides detail on the distribution of members expressing the various roles by house.

Table 1: Role Types by House

	<i>Parliamentarians</i>	<i>Political Theorists</i>	<i>Partisans</i>	<i>Policy Specialists</i>	<i>Constituency Servants</i>	<i>Unclassifiable</i>
ACT Legislative Assembly	5	2	1	4	1	0
House of Representatives	5	2	4	6	7	2
Senate	4	1	11	5	1	0

When looked at from a purely institutionalist perspective the table suggests that the different institutional structures nurture opposing preferences. The ACT legislature has relatively few *partisans* even though they are the most numerous type overall. The Senate is heavily concentrated with *partisans*, even though it might be seen as a more gentle chamber by the casual observer. The *constituency service* role is relatively rare in the Senate and ACT Legislative Assembly where the constituency does not identify with members as individuals, because each electorate has many members. There is a greater spread of role types among members of the House of Representatives, perhaps reflecting the more comprehensive nature of the pressures to which MHRs must respond.

Table 2 represents assumptions associated with the five preferential roles. As mutually exclusive assumptions they are the basis for distinct frames through which parliamentary life is viewed. As opposing frames they generate competing knowledge bases. Competing concepts about what parliament is, what it should do and how it should do it, create the conditions for a political contest between the validity of the respective elements of knowledge. As one style prevails by force of numbers it comes to dominate and characterise proceedings. The committees are being politically reshaped.

Table 2: Assumptions underpinning role identification and play

Type	Assumptions
Parliamentarian	Parliament is a highly functional institution, which simply needs MPs to enact its precepts in order to deliver optimal public policy. Benefits are delivered to constituency through the creation of good governance.
Constituency servant	Parliament is a trading post at which political power within the constituency can be exchanged for favourable distribution to the constituency from the common wealth. Benefits are distributed directly to the constituency through individual grants or connecting constituents with their entitlements.
Partisan	Parliament is an arena for competition for political credit. Political credit is won through the session and cashed in at election time. Benefits are delivered to the constituency through the implementation of a comprehensive and integrated program as represented in the party platform.
Policy specialist	Parliament is one place where policy agendas are developed and the primary place where they are promoted. Benefits are distributed to a particular policy interested constituency through the development of particular policies to a high level of sophistication.
Political theorist	Parliament is dysfunctional and will tend to achieve less than it otherwise might because it is constituted by sub optimal institutions. Benefits can only be better distributed to all constituencies by rethinking the nature of the political process.

The greatest dissimilarity among assumptions is that between the *partisan* and the *policy specialist*: this is also reflected in their respective evaluation of the significance of committee work and provides a zero sum competition between the uses towards which committees should be put. *Partisans* tended during interviews to disparage the use made of committees by those who were coded as *policy specialists* and vice versa. These differences can be traced through the discourse of each type about their preferred operational forum. In characterising the committees as the locus of ‘real work’, one *policy specialist* criticised the structure of chamber debate for the manner in which it encourages focus among *partisans* on each other rather than the issue of public interest:

I would give it (i.e. the committee) a high priority. I believe parliament plays a vital role. I think in popular perception it’s not seen as having the role it did 50–100 years ago — because of TV question time, party politics which has allowed the people to see politicians at their absolute worst without seeing also them at real work. (Senate committee member E)

They also distinguish the type of committee (ie parliamentary/party room) to which they are willing to devote personal resources, because they recognise that different forums are embedded with operational components that produce policy work in the case of the parliamentary committee and party-political work in the case of the party room committee. *Partisans* see greater significance in party room deliberations, where they can develop the party position, have direct access to front-benchers and can prevent the party doing something ill-advised that which might damage its public standing. It is easier to bring political information explicitly into the debate in the party room.

Policy specialists tended to see party room committees in reductionist terms as a vetting process, without significant time available for development. They characterise parliamentary committees as being more creative and more powerfully resourced:

I see these committees as unique. They're not like caucus committees. They have better resources and more time. There is a secretariat. You get the chance to explore a very wide range of issues with real experts. (MHR committee member L)

Parliamentary committees enable the *policy specialists* to collect and deploy technical, policy-related data. However, *partisans*, especially those in opposition parties, see detailed examination of policy questions as taking second place to issues of political significance. Here a *policy specialist* alludes to a tension with a more senior *partisan* and party colleague on a particular committee:

There is a lot of personal indulgence. I am guilty of it myself. For example, there's my desire to explore future issues that I spoke about before. I always want to look into the future of the issue rather than stick to immediate, politically pressing concerns. Some members see that as important but a waste of the committee's limited time. (MHR committee member M)

This member has felt the pressure from *partisans* who regard his specialist interests as idiosyncratic, self indulgent and an imposition on the time of others. *Partisans* condemn attempts by others to focus the committee on the needs of a narrow constituency, which they characterise as a 'personal agenda.' One described this activity as arising from 'personality defects'. This pressure also frustrates the objectives of many *constituency servants* who opt out of committee work, except of the infrequent occasions where an inquiry is focused on distribution to their particular constituency.

Conclusion

Members' explanations of their responses to these tensions suggest a number of perceptions about options for action. They can compete to establish an operational style for the committee that is consistent with their personal preferences; they can seek committees where the social environment is more conducive to their own operational style; or they can simply opt out. The preconditions for competition might exist where one use of the committee excludes another. For example a *partisan's* natural desire to broadly map the issues that divide the parties conflicts with the *policy specialist's* desire to explore an issue in depth and to develop a bipartisan approach. A *parliamentarian's* desire to allow people to bring forward evidence might conflict with a *partisan's* desire to filter evidence and bring forward only those witnesses that can prosecute the party's case, or attack those witnesses who tend to inform the case of the opposing party.

In the case of *parliamentarians* and *policy specialists*, the balance of interest lies in competing to refashion the committee because there are real objectives to be

achieved through the committee. When given the choice of assignment, members will cluster around those committees that give legitimacy to their preferential role. The *partisan* tries to get appointed to committees that deal with party-political issues, but is more likely to opt out when stuck with an appointment to a committee that is not inquiring into a party-political matter or lacks any potential to develop a public profile. *Partisans* only involve themselves in non party-political enquiries out of a desire to help meet the party's obligation to the parliament.

A majority of any one type on a particular committee will set up social pressures within the committee for a style of operation consistent with the role features of that type. Adding to this pressure is the competition for status among the operational styles that support particular roles. Some members construct arguments that legitimate an operational style for committees that supports the free operation of their preferred role. Others try to contain what they see as aberrant behaviour. *Constituency servants and policy specialists* are subjected to taboos imposed by other types that attempt to reduce the risk that the member's agenda will impose itself too greatly on the committee's more collective values. Active *policy specialists* and *constituency servants* are criticised for having private agendas, which by definition are not legitimate in a forum for the delivery of public interests. *Partisans* in turn are vulnerable to attacks by *policy specialists* and *parliamentarians* for unparliamentary behaviour, especially where the competition becomes intense. *Constituency servants* and *partisans* who choose to opt out can be criticised for their lack of a work ethic with reference to the committee.

Viewed in this way, the nature of committee work becomes as much a subject of political competition as the policy issues to which the committee turns its collective mind. Success at reconstructing the committee in accord with the objectives of a particular type wins those members an institution that directs collective resources towards their objectives. With committees doing more and more parliamentary work, this as a resource worth the winning.

This competition to reconstruct committees inevitably raises normative questions that are important in themselves but whose answers are beyond the design limitations of this study. Does the organic and contestable nature of the committee produce worthwhile results? Are some roles more inherently worthy than others? The evidence presented here does suggest that a committee dominated by members of a particular type will produce an arena that will naturally be focused on the needs of that role. *Partisans* tend to be concentrated on party-political inquiries, *constituency servants* look for distributional issues and so on. Party politics matters in the construction of some committee references, but many inquiries are focused on issues that are either non party-political, bipartisan or are not high enough on the public agenda to confer electoral advantage.

What makes for a productive committee inquiry is determined by the values inherent in each of the roles and is therefore in itself a highly contestable question. Three of the role types are by nature turned towards the service of bigger

institutions — the party, the constituency and the parliament — while the other two are more self-referential. That said even the *policy specialist* is likely to flourish where there is a match between personal interest and a wider constituency segment with the same interest. It would be possible to develop a set of criteria for what constitutes a worthwhile committee process from the needs of these superordinate institutions and then observe how successful the *partisans*, *constituency servants* and *parliamentarians* could be in cultivating committees towards these behavioural ideals. The makings of such a study already lie in the various parliamentary prescriptions advocated by the parliamentary clerks, such as the quotation from Odgers provided above.

Parliamentarians and *political theorists* tend to regard parliamentary committees as having a value in themselves because they enhance the working of the parliament. *Partisans* will naturally regard party room committees as more satisfying than parliamentary committees because of the capacity to overtly deploy political judgement. However, *Policy specialists*' desire to build expertise also helps them build a specialist profile during party room debates. While the evidence suggests that *Policy specialists* show more enthusiasm for the parliamentary committee, those in the major parties often see the parliamentary committee as a feeder of policy relevant information into the party room process. Most studies see the dominance of the party institution in parliamentary life as being exercised through the power of the executive, but the large numbers of *partisans* and the readiness of others to reference party membership when discussing their role suggests that the influence of parties is also a matter of personal preference for many members, not a hardship to be endured. In addition their appears to be a prima facie case that party room committees and parliamentary committees operate in a closer concert than their institutional separation would suggest. ▲

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