

Parliament's duelling choirs

Ken Coghill*

Agreement on the Constitution led to finding a home for the new Commonwealth Parliament becoming one of the urgent practical tasks. The grandeur of the Parliament House in Melbourne and its more strategic location on the existing transport routes happily coincided with political reasons favouring Victoria's case for the temporary capital.

The building was funded by gold, and was complemented by similar architecturally grand public buildings and St Patrick's Cathedral. Its Chambers replicated Westminster's style.

Today the building fabric differs little from when the Commonwealth senators and members left in 1927 for Canberra. It remains incomplete but nonetheless imposing externally and majestic within.

Background

Finding a home for the new Commonwealth Parliament was one of the urgent practical tasks that followed agreement on the Constitution providing for a representative democracy. The economic and demographic dominance of the two most populous and powerful colonies, New South Wales and Victoria, made the south-east of the continent the logical location. However, the competitive tension between the senior colony and its fertile junior (Victoria) or, more especially, their capitals, Sydney and Melbourne, was a major factor to be negotiated by the six colonial premiers. It was agreed that neither city could be given dominance as the permanent national capital and that a new site would be selected. Nonetheless, a temporary home was essential.

Practical considerations were crucial. Members, senators, ministers and senior public servants relied on horse-drawn vehicles, trains, riverboats and coastal steamers for transport. Even the railway to Western Australia was still a political promise born out of the constitutional negotiations. Motor vehicles were experimental toys and air-travel just a dream. Melbourne was a major port with regular services to all significant Australian

* Parliamentary Studies Unit, Monash University; former Member and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria.

ports and was geographically closer to Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia than Sydney.

Melbourne had a ready-made grand Parliament House and the Victorians were eager to offer it for the temporary home of the new Federal Parliament. The building had its own magnificent gardens and was flanked by parks. It was complemented by similarly grand public buildings, some of which were to be made available to the national government.

An added incentive to Melbourne's selection was the continuing effects of a catastrophic collapse in the local economy in the early 1890s. Property values had plummeted and took several decades to recover. The seat of national government would boost the economy.

Construction

Victoria's Parliament House was built on a gold boom. Planning began under the Legislative Council created after separation from NSW early in the prolonged boom (Victoria 1992, 19). Located on the crest of a slope and looking down one of the major retail thoroughfares, its massive colonnaded façade dominated the landscape. Early designs incorporated a huge tower, never built. Legend claims it was also designed to mask St Patricks (Catholic) Cathedral at its rear!

Classic architectural styles can be seen throughout. The imposing public face is Roman Doric, the Council Chamber is Roman Corinthian while the Assembly Chamber is Roman Ionic. Queen's Hall is Roman Doric at its lower levels; the upper levels of its walls are composite. The Library's main level is Roman Doric and its upper spaces Roman Ionic (Victoria 1992, 20-21).

The chambers were built first, over a mere nine months, in order to be ready for the first bi-cameral Parliament, elected in 1856 under the new Victorian Constitution. The gap between them was bridged by Queen's Hall, featuring a marble rendition of Victoria's namesake sovereign. The chambers and Queen's Hall are above a ground floor providing storage and offices. A grand flight of steps, incorporating a carriageway, sweeps up from Spring Street to the colonnaded cloisters, which have doors into the Vestibule. Few are aware of the strategically placed rifle slots facing out from the building — a reminder of a riotous confrontation earlier in the nineteenth century.

Fresh air was formerly brought from a ventilation tower in the gardens through timber lined ducts into the chambers. One of the first air-conditioning systems in Melbourne used ammonia to cool air in hot conditions. Fireplaces, many with chimneys ingeniously channelled through pillars, provided warmth in winter. The risk of fire spreading through the timber ducts led to their removal and the ventilation and air-conditioning system was abandoned.

Only now with increased Sittings, some in less comfortable weather, is air-conditioning of the chambers being considered.

(Insert drawing of Parliament House with tower)

(file: PH Melb tower.jpeg)

An early sketch of the design for Parliament House, Melbourne

Source: Parliament House Victoria Volume 1 House Committee Report prepared by Building Division, Public Works Department, Victoria, December 1981, 14

Materials

The construction materials have long been controversial. The core elements and lower courses are built of local bluestone. It was readily available in vast quantities and is highly durable. However, the public façade is a different matter. It is faced by a light-coloured sandstone. Sources of limestone and sandstone were not well explored in these early days of colonisation. Consequently a very large sum of money for the discovery of a suitable deposit was offered by a Select Committee. A sandstone deposit was found at Bacchus Marsh, but politicians were discouraged from using the deposit by the risks of a monopoly supply. The contract went to another source in unclear circumstances. The decision proved to be a disaster when the stone rapidly decayed. In the mid-1990s, controversy resurfaced over resumption of construction, with a dispute over the exploitation of sandstone in a national park. Interior timbers are largely cedar from northern Australia and Victorian gold leaf is used extensively.

Safety in numbers

That most democratic of Proverbs ‘Where no counsel is the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety’ greets the constant throng of Members and visitors as they move over the Vestibule’s encaustic floor tiles.

The Library is behind Queen’s Hall. Flickering gas lamps once illuminated a magnificent central reading table until the advent of electric lighting. The Parliament’s electronic services are now as modern as any.

Construction stalls

When Melbourne’s economic bubble burst in the 1890s, construction halted when the western façade was completed. It included the front steps, offices including that of the Premier, the Papers Offices and several large meeting rooms. The Council Committee Room, much favoured for public hearings, the Labor Party Room and the National Party Room are among these.

The only major construction since Federation was the northeastern corner, Incorporating the kitchen and dining facilities. This construction was funded by the Commonwealth as a parting gift when the national capital relocated to Canberra. The southeastern corner remains unbuilt. A carved stone fireplace facing the vacant space is a silent reminder.

Sitting in pews

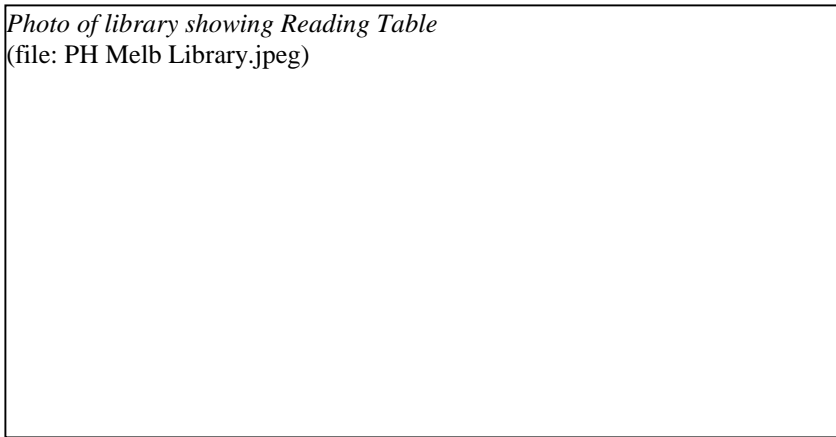
The two Chambers replicate Westminster’s style and reflect the experience of its architect, Kerr, who worked on the Houses of Parliament at Westminster before the lure of gold brought him to the colony (Chlebnikowski 9). Kemp, his partner and sometime Public Works Department Clerk of Works, had also worked on Westminster (Chlebnikowski 17). Like the House of Commons, the Chambers are rectangular with

the Presiding Officer's Chair at one end on the long central axis. Most seating is in parallel rows facing the centre, with lesser numbers on cross benches opposite the Chair. The latter are quarter circles either side of the gangway in the Council and in rows at right angles to the gangway in the Assembly. Central tables dominate the floor, with an ornate gold-plated silver Mace placed on the end of the Assembly Table when the House is in Session.

Ministers and members of their party/ies sit to the right of the Presiding Officer and their Opposition counterparts to the left. Minor party and independent members occupy the cross benches. These familiar conventions are peculiar to the Westminster tradition. About two-thirds of parliamentary chambers use part-circle seating plans. Known as 'hemicycles' in most European jurisdictions, party members are often seated left to right according to a party's place on the ideological spectrum.

The House of Commons custom of sitting in opposing rows seems to have its origins in its early meetings in St Stephen's Chapel, now in the lower levels of Westminster Palace. The small chapel has five rows of pews on each side, each divided by a gangway. The rows of pews face each other as choir pews might. Logic suggests that the Presiding Officer would have stood in front of the altar at the end of the Chapel in the familiar manner of a clergyman leading a service (Victoria 1990). Thus we can easily imagine that the group of men were channelled by the architecture into the habit of sitting in opposing rows, duelling with their voices. That habit became a culture which was acquired by new members joining the exclusive political society and was carried into new spaces. By whatever accident of history the Commons began meeting in a chapel with opposing rows of seats, that same accident likely led Victorian and then the Commonwealth Parliaments to begin meeting in chambers with similar 'Westminster' layouts.

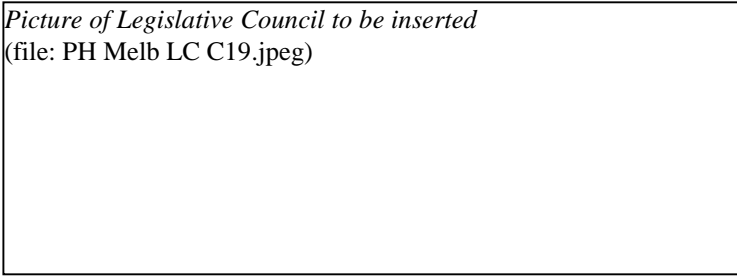
Photo of library showing Reading Table
(file: PH Melb Library.jpeg)



Reading Table, Library, Parliament House, Melbourne

Source: Parliament of Victoria (booklet), Parliament of Victoria, 2000, 8

Picture of Legislative Council to be inserted
(file: PH Melb LC C19.jpeg)



Legislative Council, Parliament House, Melbourne

Source: Parliament House Victoria Volume 1 House Committee Report prepared by Building Division, Public Works Department, Victoria, December 1981, 22

Duelling choirs or theatre in the round?

The interior design and the atmosphere of chambers seek to reflect the dignity of the Parliament and their authoritative functions. The interaction between building form and culture was acknowledged by Churchill (1943) during debate on re-building of the Commons after it was severely damaged during the Second World War. He said '(w)e shape our buildings and our buildings shape us' (quoted in Wheare 1968, 7).

Churchill (1943) was not to be swayed by any logic that may have favoured modification of the Westminster layout. He argued that:

Logic is a poor guide compared with custom. Logic which has created in so many countries semi-circular Assemblies, which have buildings which give to every member not only a seat to sit on, but often a desk to write at with a lid to bang, has proved fatal to Parliamentary Government as we know it here in its home and in the land of its birth (quoted in Wheare 1968, 5).

Part of Churchill's argument related to the greater tendency to a 'conversational style' of proceedings practised in the Commons, as compared with the preponderance of more formal contributions in Australian chambers.

There are many grounds on which Churchill's statement could be challenged, but little in subsequent history confirms any relative advantage for his preferred model. The most we might observe is that it appears parliaments can function effectively in most layouts. In the absence of any systematic qualitative assessments of their performance, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons.

Nonetheless, it is known from ecological psychology that behaviour settings can be a significant interdependent factor in people's behaviour. Accordingly, the setting created by the layout members' seating can be expected to be a factor that may affect their behaviour.

In the Westminster layout, the member speaking only has eye contact with the Presiding Officer, to whom contributions are formally addressed and political opponents seated opposite. There is no eye contact with party colleagues, unless the speaker or the colleague(s) turn to face each other. Accordingly, reactions or interjections from those with eye contact are more likely to be adverse and provocative in the typically partisan house. This type of seating arrangement cannot be facilitative of reasoned, non-adversarial debate. It is little wonder that Question Time so often degenerates into a shouting duel between the two opposing banks of voices.

In contrast, the hemicycles used by many European and other parliaments often provide for members to speak from a central rostrum near the Presiding Officer's Chair. The speaker is placed in a more formal setting and has eye contact with the entire chamber, *except* with the Presiding Officer. The setting is more like the relationships of theatre in the (half-) round. The speaker has a much stronger relationship with the audience. Although a conversational style would be physically possible, the formal setting may make it less likely. The close placement of the Chair and the rostrum facilitates the control of proceedings from the Chair.

Updating

Today the building fabric of Victoria's Parliament House differs little from when Commonwealth senators and members left in 1927 for Canberra. Although designed in a political era predating strong party structures and the complexity of modern government, before electric lighting and telecommunications, it has adapted and functioned remarkably well.

However, conditions remain severely cramped. The gardens are still blighted by a 'temporary' timber building dating from 1976. Some members lack an individual office. Ministers and other members have very few spaces in which to meet as committees or with delegations. Guests dine in a corridor and there are almost no facilities for other visitors. Committees rely on expensive off-site accommodation for their major functions. Nevertheless, computerisation and other technologies are as effective and efficient as in any Australian parliament.

Completion of the remaining one third of the building's floor space would enable its restrictions to be addressed and could only aid in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Parliament. Some earlier premiers have reputedly temporised about completion fearing that it would benefit backbenchers and weaken the dominance of the Executive. Others have felt that construction costs would be an unacceptable electoral risk. Hopefully Victoria's increasingly strong budgetary position and the renewed strength of its parliamentary institution will allow execution of plans to finish this striking and majestic centre-piece of the State's democracy. ▲

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