

# Rare MP makes a lot of sense

Independent's spray targets executive dominance within parliaments as cancer eroding MPs' role



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**P**eter Andren is one of the great peculiarities of Federal politics. He's a Lower House Independent who is not a refugee from one of the major parties — and who has survived more than one election.

Since the last war, Canberra has seen only three other Independent Federal members elected without party affiliation: Ted Mack, Phil Cleary and Tony Windsor.

Driving home one day this week, listening to the broadcast of the House of Representatives, a short speech by Peter Andren was so good that I pulled over to the side of the road to give it my full attention.

In a week dominated by the execution of Nguyen Tuong Van and the Howard Government's push to get its industrial relations, counter-terrorism and welfare-to-work Bills passed, I suppose it's not surprising that Mr Andren's speech went unreported.

Mr Andren took the NSW regional seat of Calare from Labor in 1996 with a primary vote of only 29.4 per cent. He finished just 300 votes in front of the Labor candidate, but then rode home on his preferences to beat the Nationals with 63.3 per cent of the tally.

He held Calare in 1998 and 2001 and at last year's poll, up against all the major parties, the Greens and Family First, he sneaked over the line with an absolute majority of 50.2 per cent on the primary vote. But if you distributed preferences, he would have beaten the Liberal candidate with 71.2 per cent of the vote. He must be doing something right.

"Today I am grieving for the state

of democracy in this country," is how he started his speech. The grievance debate offers a 10-minute opportunity daily for MPs to speak out.

"The more I look at local, State and Federal electoral systems in Australia, the more I see an erosion of individual rights and suppression of individual will," Mr Andren continued. "Within our parliaments, executive dominance is a cancer eroding the role of members of parliament in debating, amending and overseeing laws.

"The role of legislators is being usurped by executive Federal government and its extra-parliamentary body, the Council of Australian Governments.

"The current farce of an informed debate and inquiry into counter-terrorism laws stands in stark contrast to the United Kingdom. There, the three major terrorism laws prior to 2004 are reviewed annually by independent reviewer Lord Carlile, while the latest 2005 law is subject to a three-monthly report on control orders from the Home Secretary as well as Lord Carlile's annual review.

"In Australia there will be no independent review. COAG has become a de facto governing council. When ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope chose to let the people know about the draft counter-terrorism Bill, he was pilloried for making it available on his website.

"Stanhope's actions led to the public debate we were not supposed to have. It forced an extension — pitifully short as it has been — of the scrutiny and debate of this momentous legislation.

"There is a lack of transparency in COAG that threatens the role of parliament. Conventions of secrecy and bureaucratic confidentiality plague the process, further reducing parliamentary scrutiny, especially of crucially important human rights legislation such as the terror laws.

"Here in this winner-take-all democracy, crucial public policy issues — for example, the IR reforms, the sale of Telstra and the security legislation — have had

totally inadequate scrutiny, truncated inquiry and truncated debate."

It was a pretty good start to a 10-minute spray. It got better as he pointed to the way the Howard Government was using its new Senate majority: "One can only hope the voters will appreciate the loss of review in that place post July, and restore a Senate representation that truly reflects the public's will, not one manufactured by party prefer-

ence deals. Such representation will not, unfortunately, be achieved in the people's House. That cannot happen until we have proportional representation in this place, too.

"An overwhelming number of Western democracies — apart from the UK, Canada, the US and Australia, all relics of outdated and irrelevant Westminsterism — have a form of proportional representation.

"First-past-the-post and majoritarian preferential voting deliver far less democratic outcomes than proportional representation does.

"There is nothing wrong with minority government. We have had it in the Senate for two decades and people like it.

"It provides for consultation, compromise and even consensus. They are strange words, I know, for this Government and the major political parties, but it is exactly what people expect.

"Alliances, consensus and negotiation are the cornerstones of modern democracies. At every opportunity, the major parties in this country are trying to shore up their falling primary vote by corrupting the process.

"An amount of \$55 million of public money was squandered on an IR propaganda campaign.

"There were 11,000 television spots bought by the Government in October and \$26 million — on top of the \$55 million IR blitz — was spent by the Government on advertising across all media in October.

"That is government by spin, government by media event and government by deceit.

“And the tap is not turned off for elections as it should be with parties using their own resources. It is opened even wider with flagrant abuse of the so-called conventions applying to the use of staff and overtime, printing allowances, cars, phones, air travel, electorate offices and so it goes on.”

Then Mr Andren turned on the big players in the media, which might be a reason why he went unreported.

“To what degree does such largesse from incumbent governments influence the behaviour of the media in their coverage of politics?” he said.

“Since the Howard Government took office in 1996, \$980 million — almost \$1 billion — has been spent on Federal Government advertising.

“Such spending, along with that of the State governments — which was over \$2 billion for the same period — constitutes a significant income for media organisations, especially print and television.

“Add to that a likely relaxation of cross-media laws and it is easy to see why the media moguls and many of their correspondents are all for the political status quo, especially when it coughs up the cash and the policies.

“How often have we heard any criticism of government advertising spending on commercial radio and television?”

And then for the big finale, the sting in the tail:

“Finally, just to make sure it further cements its minority rule — that is what it is — this Government wants to close the rolls as soon as an election is called, denying tens of thousands the right to vote, but also to ban prisoners from voting, and there are strong moves within its ranks to introduce voluntary voting.

“This is the agenda: selective democracy, not representative democracy.”

Not a bad effort for a 10-minute analysis of the state of national politics. And certainly worth reporting.

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