

**DEMOCRATIC  
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**Peter Andren: An independent way in  
Australian politics**

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The news that Peter Andren, the Independent MP for the central New South Wales federal electorate of Calare,<sup>1</sup> has inoperable cancer has shocked his friends and supporters, many of whom have been gearing up to help him in his bid to make history by winning a Senate seat in the upcoming election. As Peter's news appears to have cut short his political career, it is important that there be some public reflection on his contribution to Australian politics over the last eleven years.

Over a decade characterised by lowest common denominator politics, spin, blatant misuse of public funds for party political and personal purposes and contempt for the people's parliament by the executive arm of government, Peter has been a steady beacon of integrity. His contribution should not go unrecognised - drowned out by the noise of the quasi election campaign Australians are being subjected to months out from the election proper.

I feel I am well placed to say something about Peter's success and achievements, having worked for him for five years from 1996 to 2002. I briefly discuss below ten areas where I believe Peter has made a significant contribution. There are many more, but ten is enough to make the point that there is an effective alternative approach to politics in Australia—as Peter calls it 'the Independent way'.

### **1. Elected time and again against the odds.**

Winning a seat in the House of Representatives is no easy feat. Winning a seat without the support of (or past connection with) a political party is a rarity—so rare in fact, that Peter is the only person to have achieved it in the past eleven years. There have been others elected as Independents during this period, but Peter is the only one who has never had a connection with a political party. This has made him unique as the only federal parliamentarian in the last decade there entirely because the people of his electorate voted for him, personally, to represent them. Peter has drawn enormous strength from this mandate, strength that has grown with each successive election as he secured more and more of the popular vote.

### **2. A true servant of the people of Calare.**

Peter has always been first and foremost a local member. He often says that he finds helping constituents with their day-to-day issues the most rewarding part of the job. He describes his role

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<sup>1</sup> Calare's major towns are Lithgow, Oberon, Blayney, Orange, Cowra and Ben Chifley's home town of Bathurst.

as part ombudsman, part counsellor, part researcher and part advocate. Aware that, unlike a party MP, he cannot rely on a dyed-in-the-wool block of votes, he has made servicing his constituents a priority and relies on word of mouth from satisfied ‘customers’ to shore-up his support base. During his first term, word quickly spread of his refreshing approach. Peter has also been acutely aware that in a regional electorate like Calare word would spread just as quickly if he dropped the ball, even on a single constituent matter. Hence, there has never been any complacency, despite the fact that from 2001 onwards his primary vote passed 50 per cent and Calare became one of the safest seats in the country.

### **3. Taking principled positions on politically risky issues.**

A key reason why the people of Calare have supported Peter so strongly is that they know he will take principled stands on issues—even if that means taking positions at odds with that of the majority of the electorate. Most people don’t spend their lives thinking about political issues, many of which involve complex moral dilemmas and the weighing up of many different interests and perspectives. The people of Calare have come to trust and approve of the way Peter approaches issues; not simply toeing a party line but applying his own values to reach reasoned and principled positions, issue by issue. He has often joked at the frequency with which party backbenchers file in to vote and asked him what they’re voting on—knowing that he, at least, has to be on top of the issues.

The way Peter approached the government’s highly contentious legislation in response to the arrival of the MV TAMPA in Australia’s territorial waters just before the 2001 election is a good example of the quality and courage of his approach to representation. With Labor effectively running dead on the issue, Peter found himself the only incumbent MP in the House of Representatives actively campaigning against the government’s ‘Pacific Solution’—the processing and detention of asylum-seekers outside Australian territory. And Peter’s stand was in a rural, hitherto fairly conservative electorate which many expected would boot him out on this issue alone. During that campaign Peter ran TV and radio ads clearly setting out his position on the legislation. For him it was, ‘Here I am. This is what I stand for. This is why I reject the government’s approach. This is what I think should happen. Take it or leave it.’ At the same time the Nationals mail boxed every household in the electorate crudely claiming that Peter supported terrorists. The result? The voters of Calare saw straight through the negative smear campaign

against Peter—returning him with an emphatic 15 per cent swing which took his primary vote over 50 per cent for first time.

#### **4. Shining the spotlight on travel rorts.**

If it were not for Peter efforts in 1997, in all likelihood the public would be none the wiser about the travel perks that federal MPs receive. Due to his work, details of the travel claims made by all MPs are now tabled regularly in parliament and are thus open to public scrutiny. While some prominent MPs and staff have paid high prices for the misuse of entitlements, bringing people down has never been Peter's goal. Believe me, Peter doesn't enjoy the confrontation, or the isolation in parliament that has sometimes resulted from the positions he has taken. However, he firmly believes that he has a responsibility to fight, on behalf of those not represented by the major parties, for transparency in the expenditure of taxpayers' money.

#### **5. Exposing the misuse of public funds for party political purposes.**

While Peter has received some notoriety for his work on travel rorts, less well known have been his achievements in exposing the extent of misuse of public funds by political parties, particularly during election years. Research Peter undertook following the 1998 election revealed the extent to which both the government and opposition routinely rely on a cosy 'convention' to turn on the parliamentary allowances tap to pay the wages, overtime, airfares and accommodation costs of campaign staff up to and during each federal election. Following the 2001 election the Auditor-General raised concerns about these practices, based on submissions Peter made. But so long as both major parties remain addicted to these improper funding streams the prospect of meaningful reform remains slim. These costs to the taxpayer are on top of the blatant use of parliamentary printing allowances and other electorate office resources for political campaign purposes. For example, each federal MP is now entitled to a printing allowance of \$150,000 per year. That's \$22.5 million in printing each year for the 150 Members of the House of Representatives alone.

Together these trappings of political incumbency amount to many millions of dollars in each political cycle, and these are over and above the \$37.5 million in public funding the Coalition and Labor received after the 2004 election on account of the number of first preference lower and upper house votes they received.

Peter's point in focusing attention on these practices is that he firmly believes that the access to such resources by the major parties is bad for democracy because it makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for any alternative voices to compete. To demonstrate that there is an alternative way, for each election after 1996 Peter has not begun his campaign until the election has been formally called. He has then totally separated his campaign operations from those of his electorate office, and donated all public funding received in excess of his campaign costs to local charities. He refuses to use any of his parliamentary printing allowance for campaign purposes, and rejected the government's recent offer of an additional electorate staffer for every MP, on the grounds that these positions were being rolled out not to service constituents, but to provide incumbent MPs with even more resources for use in the upcoming election.

#### **6. MPs' superannuation.**

While he's not particularly proud of it, the fact is that if it were not for Peter, the changes made by the government in 2004 to bring the superannuation of MPs more into line with the arrangements for the wider public would not have occurred. Contrary to what his critics might say, Peter has not pursued the superannuation issue for publicity, but because he passionately believes that in order to restore trust in politicians, there must be transparency in their remuneration arrangements. He has never argued that MPs shouldn't be paid well, simply that the old MPs' super scheme was overly generous (67 per cent employer contribution compared to 9 per cent for most other workers) and lacked transparency. Incidentally, he took a serious pay cut to enter politics in the first place. He also thought it was absurd that the Howard Government spent so many years pursuing choice of superannuation legislation for workers, yet wouldn't countenance choice for MPs. This hypocrisy has meant that while Peter conscientiously objected to the superannuation arrangements for MPs, he has been bound by law to be part of the compulsory parliamentary scheme. He has therefore been forced to seek actuarial advice to determine what he must do to ensure that, upon retirement, he finds himself no better off than he would have been had he continued contributing to the policy he held prior to entering parliament. I understand that any additional funds identified will be used to establish a charitable trust.

#### **7. A fairer way of increasing MPs' salaries.**

In recent weeks there has been some media coverage of the latest round of large pay increases awarded to all federal MPs. What has been missed in all of this is that for a while, I think around 2000, the vexed issue of how to deal with MPs' pay increases was at last being dealt with in a

transparent and fair way—directly as a result of Peter’s work. At that time Peter made a submission to the Remuneration Tribunal arguing that MPs’ pays should only be increased in line with annual increases in the average wages. He argued that MPs should only be rewarded to the same extent that the rest of community benefits from the policy settings they contribute to. At the time the government was making much of the fact that it had for the first time locked the aged pension in at 25 per cent of average wages. Peter had the temerity to suggest that if this form of indexation was good enough for pensioners then it should be good enough for MPs too. The Tribunal agreed and for a short while MPs’ salaries were increased each six month according to an index of average wage increases. Sadly, at some point since then this transparent and fair method for dealing with a contentious issue was quietly dumped.

#### **8. Tax deductibility for donations to independent candidates.**

Even though as a general rule Peter has not accepted large donations from supporters on the grounds that doing so would put his independence at risk, another important achievement he can claim credit for is the extension of tax deductibility status for donations to Independent candidates. Peter raised the issue repeatedly in the reviews of the 1996, 1998 and 2001 elections. Finally, some time before the 2004 election, the extension was granted. This should assist those who choose to follow Peter’s example to compete with the party machines, but who do not have the high profile he had when he contested his first election.

#### **9. The defeat of John Howard’s flawed Constitutional Preamble.**

In 1999 Peter found himself in the challenging position of having to single-handedly campaign against the Preamble John Howard wanted added to Australia’s constitution. Peter prepared the official ‘No Case’ sent to every household in the country and used his advocacy and media skills to argue the case that the proposed Preamble was a political diversion. The Preamble was resoundingly rejected by voters in the referendum of 6 November 1999. The final No vote was 60.7 per cent nationally, almost six per cent higher than the national No vote for the republic (54.9 per cent). In no State or Territory did a majority of voters support the Preamble and in only a handful of electorates did a majority vote for it. Feedback Peter received from constituents and commentators up to and immediately following the referendum indicated that his No Case had been a convincing and a significant influence on many voters.

## 10. Regional telecommunication services.

There has been no greater advocate for regional telecommunications services in Australia than Peter Andren. Telstra feared Peter for his capacity to highlight, often in the national media, the poor state of services in parts of Calare and other regional areas. It was largely as a result of Peter's relentless campaigning about the impact of the closure of the analogue mobile phone network in the late 1990s that Telstra agreed to set up the CDMA network at huge cost. Peter firmly believes that the sheer cost of providing telecommunication services in regional Australia means that a fully privatised Telstra (and by implication a fully market-based model) cannot not deliver parity of service between city and country. While he ultimately lost the battle over Telstra's privatisation, the attention he drew to the state of regional telecommunications helped to secure a tougher regulatory package than would otherwise have been the case.

## Conclusion

Peter's 2003 autobiography starts: "ANDREN IS WASTED SPACE. It would have been better for the electorate had the Labor candidate won. At least the party member knows how to work the angles in Canberra." So said the National Party "spokesman" the day after I first won the federal electorate of Calare in central-western New South Wales in March 1996 ...<sup>2</sup>

Already during 2007 Australians have been subjected to a constant stream of questionable ethical behaviour in Australian politics and the public service. Through all of this Peter Andren has been there, tirelessly working away, raising issues the major parties don't want raised, striving to raise standards through example, showing that there is a viable and effective alternative approach to being an MP in Australia.

His critics run argument like, 'It's OK for Andren because he's all care and no responsibility,' but I would counter that by saying that Peter has always felt very deeply the burden of responsibility to fearlessly represent the people of his electorate through unbiased consideration of what is in the best interest of Calare and the nation as a whole. I stress the dual local and national perspectives, because underpinning Peter's approach to politics has always been a belief that the people of Calare voted for him to be their representative in Canberra on national issues, not simply to vote parochially for whatever outcome might serve their interests best.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Andren (2003), *The Andren Report: An independent way in Australian politics*, Melbourne: Scribe, p.1.

Peter's job has no doubt been a lonely and at times stressful, frustrating and thankless one. But I am sure he would also say it has been a tremendous honour and very rewarding. I know that on occasions, on the long drives home to Millthorpe after parliamentary sittings, Peter has despaired at the state of the nation's politics, and particularly at the contemptuous way the people's parliament is treated by the executive government. Things have improved since 2001 with Bob Katter and Tony Windsor joining him on the Independent benches; they have worked well to maximise each other's contributions in parliament. However, Peter still longs for more balanced representation in the House of Representatives and a return to a balance-of-power situation in the Senate, to ensure that legislation isn't just 'rubber stamped' but, rather, subjected to close scrutiny. Such concerns underpinned his decision to run for a Senate spot at the next election.

Perhaps the stresses of the job have contributed to the awful illness Peter is now fighting. We will never know. But what I do know is that Peter has been far from 'wasted space'. The ten achievements I have discussed above just scratch the surface. Peter has been so successful in Calare because people crave the kind of representation he has given them. Once they got a taste for it, they wanted more and more because they realised he was the real deal—a politician who wanted nothing more than to represent his community in federal parliament.

His electors might not have agreed with him on every issue, but they have stuck with him all the same because they know he stands for some things that are sadly all too rare in Australian politics—modesty, sincerity, integrity, objectivity and a deep sense of ethics. I am not by any means saying that Peter is perfect. No one is. But for over a decade Peter has made an important contribution to Australian politics against the odds. It is a contribution that needs to be recognised, but is at risk of being ignored because of the way the major parties dominate political discourse in this country—particularly at this point in the electoral cycle.

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