

## Axminster or Westminster?

30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Opening of New Parliament House, 9 May 1988

Over three sitting days from December 1985 to February 1986, senators debate the colour scheme for their chamber in the new Parliament House. On 14 November 1985, Western Australian Liberal Noel Creighton-Browne gives notice of a three-part amendment to the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Parliament House. His final clause would have rejected

the proposal ... for the walls of the new chamber to be lined with fabric of varying colours, not consistent with the traditional red colour common to Westminster-style Upper Houses.

Learned senators point out that no one knows what the traditional colour had been because the carpet of the House of Lords had been destroyed in the fire of 1834. When had the tradition of that current shade of red been invented?

In supporting the amendment, South Australia's Amanda Vanstone tables the letter she wrote in September to the Minister inquiring whether the proposed shift away from Westminster colours also asserts a desire to shift away from 'the Westminster system of Parliament.' Everything from Britain or America, Vanstone fears, is under threat from a 'Wallaby mentality': 'The great tragedy is that in Australia we are going through a euphoric phase of wanting everything to be Australiana ...

'Australiana' hints at the rise of Aboriginal art. One context for the dispute is the renewed push for Aboriginal land rights in alliance with opposition to uranium mining.

Interjecting 'Not Utopia!', Liberal Senator Jessop takes a two-pronged stab at the best-known brand of Aboriginal fabric designers and at socialism. 'Reds under the beds?' Labor Senator Crowley wonders. 'Balmain pinks' chirps up Vanstone. Peter Cook swings back at the 'conservatives' who cling to 'Politburo Red', while Gareth Evans accuses them of unhealthy attachments to the 'pillar-box of hanging-judge red.'

To Jessop's eye, 'the "red" carpet sample is more appropriately described as ochre/mud.' Crowley cannot believe the Chamber could do better than the colours in Fred Williams's Pilbara series, commissioned by CRA-RTZ.

Pilbara red is anemic, protests Creighton-Browne, having lived there for six years. When debate resumes two days later, he reports that the designers have assured him that the red does not reference the Pilbara but the veins in a gum leaf. This links the Senate colourings to the eucalypt green in the House of Representatives.

On 20 February 1986, on a free vote, Creighton-Browne's amendment goes down twenty-four votes to forty-three in favour of the change to 'Australiana'. All labour senators vote in favour. The Liberals split with small-l ones voting for tradition – such as Puplick. The

Nats won't have a bar of bush colours. The Democrats divide with Janine Haines fussing over about the difficulties of keeping pale shades clean.

Thirty-two years on, Vanstone deserves the final word: 'Once we get over the inferiority complex we will find that the chamber in the new Parliament ... will be dated.'

Humphrey McQueen