

OPINION

Brawling in the bear pit

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September 13, 2009

JUDGING by the nightly TV news, the public tends to view the goings-on in Federal Parliament as a knock-down, drag-out brawl. It's not an unreasonable view, formed out of the 15-second television grabs from question time – the most hostile part of the day's parliamentary proceedings. But what happens the rest of the time?

First to the hostility: starting a parliamentary sitting week can be like entering a conflict zone. The Australian system is called an "adversarial parliamentary democracy", which sounds nasty.

Anything can happen in the conflict zone. A minister or opposition spokesman or woman can be targeted at question time by the other side loaded up with ammunition quietly gathered during the parliamentary recess.

Booby traps can be set by seemingly innocuous questions. An unsuspecting minister can fall into the trap and mislead the Parliament, leading to a censure motion and triggering calls to resign.

Under the Westminster system a minister is obliged to take ultimate responsibility not only for personal errors and transgressions but for maladministration within his or her department. Yet outside the bear pit of question time, politicians generally behave towards each other with great civility.

It's like a footy match. The starting hooter sounds, it's on for young and old, the full-time hooter blows and the players walk off the field having a yarn with each other.

But TV viewers never see that. Conflict sells.

In Parliament there is actually far more harmony than conflict. Friendships are formed across the political divide. Ben Chifley and Sir Robert Menzies used to share a scotch in the evenings after being at each other's throats earlier in the day.

Sir James Killen and Fred Daly, although tough political adversaries, were great mates. Bob Hawke and Andrew Peacock shared a love of horse racing, a topic of regular banter and hard-luck stories.

Those of us seeking to stay at least half-fit are crazy enough to emerge from the Canberra darkness on icy mornings to play touch football on a Senate playing field that was originally intended for lawn bowls.

A typical game would involve Joe Hockey, Mark Arbib, Barnaby Joyce, Robert McClelland, Steve Fielding and Damian Hale lining up against Joel Fitzgibbon, Alex Hawke, Chris Hayes, Bruce Billson, Graham Perrett, Bob Katter and me.

You won't know them all, but the point is this: Liberal, Labor, Nationals, Family First and independents all mix in together. Lots of laughter, a Labor five-eighth putting a dashing Liberal centre through a gap to be tagged in cover defence by a flying Family First winger. We're legends in our own minds. Just imagine the sight of a lumbering Hockey carting the ball up and offloading at the line to a quick-stepping Arbib. It happens.

Yet six hours later in question time it can be an all-in brawl.

Even then it's not unusual to see opponents leaving the chamber in deep discussion about a piece of legislation or a committee report – or even how the family is going.

Parliamentary women have taken up the challenge, too, turning out for netball games on Tuesday mornings and rowing on Lake Burley Griffin pre-dawn in a mixed eight.

Many friendships and support groups enjoy bipartisan patronage: Parliamentarians Against Child Abuse, Friends of Schizophrenia, a Prostate Cancer Awareness Group ... and the list goes on.

It is said that the only thing going for democracy is that it's the least worst of all the systems. Of the 203 countries of the world, only 75 are parliamentary democracies.

OK, question time might get a bit unseemly, but there's a decency around the Australian Parliament the public rarely sees.

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Source: smh.com.au