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Does anybody in Canberra really know anything?

by Noel Turnbull, adjunct professor media and communications RMIT University

On Tuesday I made my first visit to Parliament House Canberra for almost a decade and my first non-ministerial wing entrance for twice that time.

This will no doubt horrify some who will then wonder how on earth I could have been writing about politics and communications in that time without being at the coal-face. But the visit reminded me again that, while in science getting closer and closer can lead to revelations, in political science it often makes things darker and harder to see.

I went with a team of Save VCA campaigners — students, supporters and staff — organised by the National Tertiary Education Union to lobby backbenchers and advisers on rescuing VCA from the funding cuts made by Brendan Nelson and the subsequent changes imposed by the new VCA management.

With the normal lobbying rush of racing between offices, waiting around and having meetings shifted, it was interesting to watch people trying to gauge what was going on from the atmospherics, the brief conversations and the reactions to these.

The first observation is that because most press gallery members are expected to know what's going on, but generally only know what they have been told, there is a paradoxically increased push to be authoritative. Like politicians they can't say they don't know, so instead create some appearance of authority, astute observation or report about something — colour, light, movement, leadership speculation, polls — which are interesting and are easy to report authoritatively.

For instance, probably no-one outside the PM and a couple of others (and perhaps not even them yet) really knows when the next election will be, but everyone has an opinion on it and a strong view on what the timing means.

For myself, perhaps the only authoritative judgment I have ever felt able to make after visiting Parliament House, is what the art on the wall of MPs offices say about the MP.

Parliament House inhabitants — like inhabitants of boarding schools, prisons and other unnatural environments — place much greater emphasis on incidentals and atmospherics than people in the real world. So someone's mood, body language and off-hand comments assume far more significance than they might from a distance. And then the comments about the moods, body language and comments get interpreted and re-interpreted in the light of bigger questions about who will win the election.

The historian, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto in his book *Millennium*, asked his readers to carry out a thought experiment when thinking about the past. If you were someone sitting in another galaxy in a thousand years time looking at the Reformation, what on earth would it look like and how significant would the differences between Protestants and Catholics actually seem to you? In Canberra it is easy to create an analogous thought experiment just by getting on the plane back home.

But it is also easy to forget how willing to help some backbenchers and many political advisers are prepared to be. Admittedly we were auspiced by a union using their contacts, but MPs (and advisers) were prepared to put in a word for us and, more importantly, make suggestions about how we could further our campaign. So did Opposition advisers. Now arguably backbenchers are excluded from much significant decision-making and thus may have more time to help in between being required to participate in parliamentary rituals.

But when a backbencher from Brisbane, for whom we would be lucky to swing one vote, takes the time to engage with the issues and suggest a number of options we hadn't considered, it reminds you that most of us got involved in politics in the first place because we wanted to change things.

On the other hand — while help is plentiful — getting commitments or decisions on core issues is as difficult as ever. Canberra lobbying visits are simply for consciousness-raising and not for commitments.

But that doesn't stop the lobbyists coming. With what is almost certainly the last sitting of this Parliament underway, the place was crawling with them and I ran into several I knew even before I got out of the airport.

So — what did I conclude after getting back home?

First, it seemed that some backbenchers were nervous but neither the Coalition nor the Government really believed the Government would lose the next election even if this personal observation was probably only impressionistic confirmation bias. Second, there was no hint from anywhere that anyone had an inkling of last night's events. Third, from the Fernandez-Armesto millennial galactic view — either everyone in Canberra knows nothing or nobody in Canberra knows anything.

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