The new breed

Peter Browne meets a different kind of politician, the independent member for Calare, Peter Andren.

It's a Wednesday morning in late November and I'm sitting in a classroom at St Joseph's Primary School, Molong, about an hour's drive north-west of Bathurst. Peter Andren, the independent federal member for Calare, is telling a room full of attentive grade four, five and six students about parliament, political parties and how he goes about representing the electorate. Returned to Canberra with an extraordinary 15 per cent swing three weeks earlier, he is emphasising the importance of independent MPs in the parliamentary process. But when the kids start asking questions it's not long before terrorism and asylum seekers come up.

'Do you think Australian troops should be sent to help find bin Laden?' asks one. It's not an easy question to answer concisely in front of 40 primary school kids, some of them only ten years old. But Andren isn't at all evasive, carefully explaining his fear that the US and its allies could get caught up in another protracted conflict like the war in Vietnam. 'Thankfully,' he says, 'it seems that the objective will be achieved. But who will take the Taliban's place? There are a lot of doubts about the mob we've been helping.'

'You know the asylum seekers?' asks another grade-sixer. 'Why were they throwing children off the boat?'

Relieved that I don't have to answer this question either, I start loading film into my camera while Andren recounts the events surrounding that notorious allegation. But when he gets stuck on the most recent details he turns to me for extra information. Forty faces swing in my direction as I do my best to summarise the Navy's view of the original incident, which emerged a few days before the election.

Despite this minor gap in his knowledge, Andren's attitude towards the boat people is informed and sincerely held. Its strength became clear when the government's first 'border protection' bill was introduced on 29 August. With an hour's notice he spoke against the bill in parliament, according to Laurie Oakes in The Bulletin, it was 'the gutsiest speech' on the day. 'We cannot claim the high moral ground in sending our troops against Saddam,' Andren told the House, 'we cannot condemn the Taliban extremists, if we aren't prepared to accept there are thousands of persecuted victims of those regimes who manage to escape. Why wouldn't they seek asylum in the most free nation on earth?'

As he told the students at St Joseph's, he believes that our first instinct should be to welcome people seeking asylum. Although it was a risky stand for a rural independent, it seems to have done no damage at all to his support in the electorate. Nor is it the first time Andren has spoken out on issues which, according to conventional wisdom, we wouldn't expect to win support in Calare. In April 2001, for example, he introduced a private member's bill aimed at abolishing mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory.

But attempting a more detailed assessment of how voters in Calare reacted to
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Andren’s attitude to the boat people—and whether his success offers lessons for the major parties—is not straightforward. Over the three elections that Andren has successfully contested, support for the two Coalition parties has fallen significantly in Calare, not just because of Andren’s success but also because of the 11 per cent vote for One Nation in 1998. This year, perhaps as a consequence, the Liberals decided not to contest a candidate, leaving the field to the National Party. The Coalition vote fell by over two per cent, suggesting that part of Andren’s increased support could have come from former Liberal voters, some of whom would undoubtedly have been alienated by the National Party’s strident and simplistic ‘anti-boat people’ campaign in Calare.

The dramatic fall in support for One Nation at this election would also have benefited Andren. He has been a vocal advocate for farming groups and local industry and a strong opponent of Telstra privatisation—all of which has some appeal for former One Nation voters—as well as taking up popular issues like the generosity of superannuation benefits for federal parliamentarians.

Underlying all this is Andren’s seemingly unassailable standing in the community. I didn’t encounter anyone in Bathurst who didn’t admire his performance as local member, and people who have spoken face-to-face with him find that he’s a good listener who communicates frankly but undogmatically. The worst criticism I heard is that he doesn’t have a sense of humour (although I wouldn’t describe him as humourless). His Labor opponent in the November election, Kath Knowles, obviously disagrees with various of Andren’s policies—she mentioned his support for the government bill to exempt small businesses from the unfair dismissal rules—and argues that independents benefit from being under less pressure to release broad, coherent policies. But she readily concedes that Andren’s energy and visibility have won him a high level of regard over the five-and-a-half years since he entered parliament.

At Bathurst’s daily paper, the Western Advocate, journalist Tony Rhead says Andren is ‘astute and hard-working’ as a local MP. ‘I’ve yet to meet anyone who hasn’t been happy with the outcome when they’ve taken a problem to him.’ In the electorate, he says, Andren is credited with successfully pursuing Telstra over rural services, and persuading the federal government to change Austudy rules that threatened to disadvantage the children of farming families. The Advocate editorialised against the government’s asylum seeker policy and reported sympathetically on Andren’s decision to oppose it.

When I talked to Labor’s Kath Knowles over a cup of coffee back in Bathurst, she also drew a useful distinction between the political culture of an electorate like Calare and its urban counterparts. A local member who effectively represents the broad interests of the electorate, she says, can expect to retain a seat like Calare almost regardless of which party he or she belongs to. One great advantage many rural members have is their access to a comparatively large number of media outlets. Andren has a column in two daily papers, and is sought for comment by local and regional television, radio and weekly and tri-weekly papers. An urban MP, by contrast, will usually have only a handful of free weeklies published within his or her electorate.

In Andren’s case, the range of media and his own background in television—nearly 20 years with Channel 8 (now Prime) and 2CG in Orange—combine to reinforce his image of energy and commitment in Calare. The day we drove to Molong, Telstra announced job cutbacks in one of its divisions, with a potential impact within Calare. Prime Television’s newsroom called Andren straight away (on the road between Orange and Molong) to find out what he knew about the cuts and to arrange to film an interview for the evening news. As if to underline the importance of Telstra in rural Australia, his mobile phone periodically cut out as we wound our way to Molong.

I first met Peter Andren in April last year, on the day he introduced his private member’s bill on mandatory sentencing. Only one member of the government and five opposition MPs were present when he spoke in the House, and a small handful of journalists watched from the press gallery.

What the missing MPs and journalists didn’t hear was a persuasive, well-researched speech delivered with passion.
and conviction. As Andren spoke, a few ALP members trickled into the chamber, then in came a large Labor contingent to hear Kim Beazley introduce his own bill on mandatory sentencing. Beazley was luckier than Andren: by the end of his speech another two government MPs had wandered into the House.

Although it was prepared with none of the resources of the government or opposition, Andren’s speech was an important contribution to the mandatory sentencing debate. Later, in the midst of his small, enthusiastic staff in Parliament House, he seemed unperturbed by the customary absence of government members during his speech, but a little surprised that members of the press gallery had complained he hadn’t warned them that he’d be speaking.

Andren was elected as member for Calare, a regional New South Wales seat taking in Lithgow, Bathurst and Orange, in 1996. This was the federal election that propelled no fewer than five independents into the House of Representatives, all but one of them to be pitched out by their electorates two-and-a-half years later. Of the five, only Andren, who had been working at Prime Television, had not previously been a member of one of the major parties.

Andren decided to run in 1996 when the sitting Labor member announced his retirement. ‘A lot of people were particularly unimpressed with the candidates coming forward for the 1996 election, and someone suggested that I run as an independent,’ he told me at Parliament House. ‘I thought long and hard about it and thought, why not? I’d been up there for 20 years or more and I felt that it was my patch of dirt as much as anyone else’s, that I knew the issues. Like everyone else I was critical of the abandonment of the regions by successive governments. The National Party had become the little red caboose on the end of the Liberal train. So for all of those reasons I wondered how well regional and rural areas were being represented.’

Andren’s win in 1996 was based on a simple electoral calculation. ‘When I sat down with one of my sons and looked at the numbers from the 1993 election I could see that the Labor vote was never going to hold up,’ says Andren. The Labor member, David Simmons, had built up a strong position which was unlikely to be maintained after his retirement. ‘I was confident that if I could come second, or better, on the primary vote then I’d pick up support from both ends of the spectrum.’ That’s exactly what happened. Andren received nearly 30 per cent of first preferences, picked up second preferences from Labor and the Nationals, and ended up with 63 per cent of the two-candidate preferred vote.

Other independents have managed to sneak over the line in three-cornered contests, but it’s unusual for them to go on to win an increased share of the vote at the next election, and to tie down one of the safest seats in Australia. Andren gained over 40 per cent of the primary vote in 1998—a swing of 11 per cent—and a remarkable 72 per cent of the two-candidate preferred vote.

Armed with that convincing majority, he set about representing his electorate on an enormous range of issues. Petrol pricing, coal mining, fuel grants, Telstra and superannuation are among those with particular resonance in Calare, but Andren has also spoken in parliament on the less predictable topics of drug policy, reconciliation, East Timor and mandatory sentencing. He argued persuasively against the government’s intention to deny prisoners the right to vote, and he opposed the government’s bill to censor internet content.

To keep up with this workload Andren has a staff of just four people. As a result of a deal between Brian Harradine and the former Labor government he is entitled to one more staff member than an ordinary backbencher in recognition of the fact that he has none of the resources of a parliamentary party.

During Andren’s first term his job wasn’t made any easier, he says, by the attitude of many members of the government. Like his counterparts in Victoria, who later had an opportunity to take revenge on the Kennett government, Andren says that ‘apart from a couple of ministers’ the Howard government treated him with ‘a degree of contempt’.

Things changed in the second term. ‘There was a lot more respect because I came in with the third safest seat in the place.’

Peter Andren had accumulated enough respect in the community and pushed enough local issues in parliament that his views on asylum seekers—whether voters agreed with them or not—did not pose an electoral problem.

persuaded by Andren’s newspaper columns on the topic and his appearances on radio and TV, which responded to the National Party’s scare campaign (‘You might like Peter Andren ... but you won’t like what he thinks about protecting Australia’s borders.’) with an argument for humane policy. Others, according to Tony Rhead at the Western Advocate, would have admired his courage in stating an unequivocal position on the issue.

It’s impossible to draw any firm conclusions about the significance of Andren’s achievement for other parties. Local electors knew that their vote for Andren would not contribute to the election of a government with a different attitude to ‘border protection’. But it may be that Andren’s decision to adopt a potentially unpopular stance helped to consolidate his reputation among segments of the community and so contributed to his dramatic rise in support.

On the way to Bathurst Airport I mentioned to the taxi driver that I’d spent the previous day with Peter Andren. ‘Andren, eh?’ he said. ‘I always think that independents are a bit like granny’s tooth—all alone and not much use.’ He paused. ‘But, gee, he seems to be stirring them up, doesn’t he?’

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