

Opinion

MPs must ask what they can do for their country



PETER
COSTELLO

When I first walked into the House of Representatives in 1990 I noticed there was a glass case by the door. Displayed inside it was an extract from an article written by Robert Menzies for *The New York Times* in 1948.

The glass case is no longer there. I asked after it last year and was told it had been moved during building works now long completed. The Clerk of the House started a search to find it which led to some back corner of the labyrinthine Parliament House. The members no longer walk past it. They no longer read the words. Maybe Menzies is considered passé, but the words are not: "I believe that politics is the most important and responsible civil activity to which a man [and we should interpose woman] may devote his character, his talents and his energy . . . We must aim at a condition of affairs in which we shall no longer reserve the dignified name of statesman for a Churchill or a Roosevelt, but extend it to lesser men who give honourable and patriotic service in public affairs."

I always liked those words – honourable and patriotic service. Most of the Members who come to Canberra come with that intention. A few get sidetracked by the benefits. Some spend their time in endless scheming and plotting against their colleagues. But the bulk render their service to varying degrees of ability.

In the mid 1980s when I was newly married with a young child and buying my first home, I was paying interest rates of 17 per cent. I was self-

employed. One year I paid more in tax than I earned in income – such were the vagaries of the provisional tax system. I could not accept that this was the best Australia could do. I decided to run for election. I wanted to lower interest rates and lower taxes. I knew that to get the government house in order we needed to balance the budget. I was elected on a platform to do that. After six years in opposition I got my chance.

I never thought I would have four terms in government. I never thought we would make the progress we did.

To me the important thing in politics is not the office a person achieves. The important thing is the outcomes a person achieves. Of course, one has more clout to get better outcomes as a minister and more still as a prime minister. But it is better to get some real achievements for the public than to hold the highest office and leave things worse than you found them.

Judged by length in office, the NSW Labor Government – now in its 15th year – has been smashingly successful. Judged by results it is a dismal failure. Which is the true test of political success, the office or the outcome?

When the Howard government was defeated in 2007 it had changed the Australian economy. There was no unemployment, there were no strikes, there were record rises in wages, we did not argue about how big the budget deficit should be or which taxes should rise. We argued about how big the surplus should be and which taxes to cut. We did not argue about how much debt to take on but how to build assets for future generations.

Measured by results this was a time of great achievement. It was a disappointment to lose that election. But the consolation is that we did not waste the opportunity of government. I will stack that record against any other period of Australian history.

I reflected on all this when I announced that I would not nominate for re-election. I came to Canberra to do a job – not to get a job. And I feel the job was accomplished.

Since the change of government some of those things have gone backwards. But you will always have successors in politics. You cannot control them. If your ambition is to make sure no one interferes with your achievements you will have to make sure you can control your successors or go the Mugabe route and stay in office forever.

In politics there is always something more to be done – another tax cut, another road to be built, another pension increase. But the opportunity to do this depends on the grace of the electors, the preselectors, the co-operation of colleagues, overcoming the different levels of government and dealing with the various interest groups. In truth one gets a narrow window in politics. I have been able to take a large one, serving as treasurer longer than anyone else in the history of our country.

I am confident about how history will judge the results. I have had the privilege of patriotic service. It is time to allow someone else that great opportunity.

Peter Costello, a former federal treasurer, is the Liberal member for Higgins.