

Memo to future MPs: don't leave your run too late



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Even before the Liberal Party opened nominations for the north shore seat of Bradfield, Arthur Sinodinos, former chief of staff to John Howard, ruled himself out as a candidate. "I know the sacrifices involved in a serious political career," he said.

With a decade of experience as a staffer at the highest level, Sinodinos would make an enormous contribution to political life. But he is right. There are huge sacrifices. And no one can be criticised for taking them into account.

It may be that Sinodinos is not ready for an election right now. But there is another opportunity that will come up next year – the seat of Bennelong. Stanley Bruce is the only prime minister apart from John Howard to lose his own seat at an election. Bruce won it back the next time round.

Obviously, Howard will not seek to do the same. The seat is on a margin of 1.4 per cent. The Coalition cannot win the election unless it wins in Bennelong. It would be a fitting tribute to his old boss if Sinodinos could nominate and win Bennelong back for the Liberal Party.

In a newspaper column last week, Sinodinos made some generous suggestions about career options I should consider. So I feel relaxed about giving him some advice in return: don't leave your political run too late.

Most people who rise to become party leaders and senior ministers start in parliament at an early age. Menzies was first elected to the Victorian parliament at 33. Howard was first elected at 34, Malcolm Fraser at 24, Harold Holt at 27, Andrew Peacock at 27. I was first elected at 32.

It takes a long time to learn the skills for a successful political career and usually there are a few electoral cycles to go through before you reach a senior post. The stunning exception to this rule is Bob Hawke – first elected at the age of 50. But he had been a full-time politician, as ACTU president, for decades before he was elected to Canberra.

This is where political experience comes in. Political experience can shorten the learning curve. A candidate who has worked in politics will pick up the skills required to be an MP far quicker than one that hasn't. As a result, they can start later. Sinodinos has experience. Without prior political experience you had better start out well before your 50s.

In 2004, two new members were elected to the Coalition team – one just under 50, Malcolm Turnbull – and one a little over, Andrew Robb. By their second term, each has done extremely well, one elected as party leader and the other a senior frontbencher.

Each had considerable previous political experience before being elected. Turnbull was a political journalist, federal treasurer of the Liberal Party and headed the "Yes" campaign in a national referendum on the republic. Robb had been a staffer to Andrew Peacock and federal campaign director in two elections.

Although each had extensive experience in politics and campaigning, I am sure each would acknowledge the transition to the life of an MP was difficult and took a considerable adjustment.

I am not saying every political staffer will be a success in parliament. No amount of backroom experience can prepare a person to excel in spontaneous speeches in the House of Rep-

resentatives. Political advisers can be experts on how to answer a question after the event. But the skill is to do it instantaneously on the television set with the studio lights blazing and the interviewer breathing down your collar.

Staffers do not practise walking through shopping centres, cameras in tow, shaking hands with all and sundry and smiling at friend and enemy alike during an election campaign. These are skills they must learn as an MP.

But those who start young have more time to learn them.

The most important adjustment a person must make to public life is the loss of privacy. Those who come to elected office late in life will find the media intrusion a form of torture, particularly if they are used to respect in their former occupations.

Nothing prepares you for the first occasion when your photograph is plastered across the front page of the newspaper distributed to neighbours, children, friends, relatives and the whole country with accompanying stories about how incompetent or morally deficient you have proven to be. It hurt me for the first 20 or 30 times. After that, you start to get used to it.

Like learning to walk, talk and how to use a computer, you are best equipped to learn these skills when you are young. You have less to lose. The cost of failure is lower. You have plenty of time to recover. If you're thinking about a parliamentary career: don't leave it too late.

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