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As I write this, Danna Vale, the Liberal MP for Hughes, the Federal electorate in which I live, is leading a backbench revolt against the refusal of her leader, the Prime Minister Mr Howard, to override State and Territory laws on mandatory sentencing. Though she is unlikely to succeed, as so few backbench “revolts” succeed, her attempt, and its coverage in the media, is a perfect case in point to illustrate the thesis of this well-written and deeply-researched monograph.  

This book could, in fact, be used as an operating manual by backbenchers wanting to obtain better media coverage of their views, and I am sure it will sell at least one copy for every federal and state backbencher in the country.  

It deserves to. If this book were, as it were, sitting on the Frontbench at Question Time, there is not a question about the relationship between the media and the Parliamentary infantry which it could not answer - except, perhaps, why the Non-Members Bar was closed for lack of use. Its author Trish Payne, the Parliamentary Fellow during the 38th Parliament of 1997/98, her target period, has done a thoroughly professional job. Topics such as “Attracting The Media”, “The Gallery’s Assessment of the Value of the Backbench Relationship”, “The Government’s Tuesday Party Meeting Briefing”, “Meshing Party, Electorate and Conscience”, “Becoming Newsworthy”, “Backbench Frustration at Question Time”, and “Using Press Releases” are covered thoughtfully, intelligently and succinctly.

Her conclusions, which are altogether plausible, do not suggest that the Parliament functions quite as its founders might have wished. The political parties, which were not expected to be so dominant, have taken over the chamber, controlling members rather as a lion tamer controls his beasts -- making them perform on cue, beating them down when they assert themselves, and occasionally allowing them to roar ineffectually to frighten the children.  

She paints a portrait of a herd mentality -- the heading of one of her many sub-sections -- composed of people elected to
represent diverse constituencies with very different perspectives and problems, people who themselves have strong views on most issues, but who feel afraid to buck the system except when they are allowed a (rare) conscience vote, usually on issues involving religious sensibilities such as in vitro fertilisation.

Every now and then a backbencher, resembling perhaps an errant sheep on some farm, will dart away from the herd, only to be brought back to the mob, panicked and subdued, by the sheepdogs known as Parliamentary Whips. He or she will have had a brief taste of freedom of public expression, and of the unfettered access to the media enjoyed by all members of Cabinet. It is not a pretty picture, always, which Payne paints and, as she makes clear, revolt from the backbench is not exactly the mainstream pathway to selection for the Frontbench. Indeed, though she does not say so, a reader might suspect that backbench revolt may sometimes be a form of revenge by those who are, clearly, never going to make it to the frontbench. Still, we should take heart perhaps from the fact that there are backbench Members who have the courage of their convictions -- or the clamor of their electorate threatening to unseat them at the next election -- who do buck the Government and who may, occasionally, even have some effect upon Government policy.

Payne examines at length two examples of backbench upsurge which occurred during the 38th Parliament: the rise of Pauline Hanson, and the revolt against Sydney Airport flight path allocations of Liberal backbencher Paul Zammit.

Hanson, a renegade expelled former Liberal (as distinct from a maverick, who makes waves but remains within the Party herd) is well known for her racist and reactionary views. Payne explores in some detail the rise to influence of this populist phenomenon, canvasses the by now well-known view that she represented the frustration of rural Australia at the policies of successive Governments, which appeared to favor the cities, and then comes up with something new: Hanson was not, she says, as so many have assumed, an ignorant and politically naive fishmonger, but an astute, pragmatic operator who calculated her every move and rose to fame by exploiting the media, using shock as her main tactic within a strategy of subverting her (former) leader.

Zammit, on the other hand, representing a constituency threatened by Howard’s vacillating airport-noise policy with a huge increase in low-altitude approach flights, is used by Payne to illustrate her argument that the surest way to attract attention from the Parliamentary Press Gallery is to attack your leader when your party is in power. Pressed by his electors to reduce air traffic noise over their homes, knowing that his thin majority would be wiped out if he did not, and frustrated by his inability to influence
Governement policy Zammit, after many protests and two long meetings with the Prime Minister, solved his problem -- if not his electorate’s -- by resigning from the Liberal Party, though not from his seat, which he continued to represent as an Independent. Cynical journalists shouted “self-interest”. To Payne, though, he was an example of how a backbencher can momentarily command the attention of the Government and the nation by using the media through an attack on his own leader.

This book is not without its faults. Payne does, in my view, focus too much on the print, as distinct from the electronic media in her analysis of the relationship between backbenchers and Gallery journalists. She is occasionally naive when judging the motives of public figures, and she shies away from exploring the issue of alleged anti-conservative bias by the ABC, surely the very sort of issue a monograph like this should cover.

Having said that, however, this book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of the Australian political media and its subterranean workings in New Parliament House. By focussing on the backbench and not on the usual Cabinet star players, she affirms democracy even as she uncovers some of its creaking, poorly-oiled machinations.

As for Danna Vale, her fifteen minutes of fame as a conscientious nonconformist appears, at the time of writing, already to be over. She has stamped herself as a compassionate maverick, but her modest revolt has again confirmed Payne’s view that although backbenchers may be there only to make up the numbers, and though they may be considered by some journalists to be the lowest form of political life who should be seen and not heard -- well, perhaps herd -- they can still, when they act outside their party allegiances, strike tiny blows for democracy, a form of governance which has, arguably, been created over the centuries by hundreds of just such tiny blows.