This was my second sitting period\(^1\) in Parliament. This time I would not come to everything new. I had some feeling for the job, for the chamber, for the people, for the institution. I had established an office, had somewhere to stay in Canberra, had competent staff, and knew how to organise transport, how to find food and how to use the library. I had friends within ministerial offices and within the apparatus of the Opposition. I had made friends with senators and members, and with their staff. In the electorate, I had made progress, too. Constituents, party organisation people and community groups had established networks with me and there was plenty to do. Yet rather than being a time of steady work and consolidation, of building on that base, the period was to prove one of drama and high tension in which the groundwork was laid for the dismissal of the Government on 11 November.

During the first six months of 1975, I was to travel abroad for Amnesty International, was to vote at a second and successful leadership challenge, and was to see an acceleration of the stumbling incompetence and uncertainty that marked this last year of the Whitlam Government. The details surrounding the search for loans from overseas sources, irregularities in executive council

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\(^1\) A session is defined in Odgers (1976: 619), as follows: it ‘begins with an official opening by the Governor-General and ends either by prorogation or by dissolution of the House of Representatives’. What we casually refer to as the Budget Session or the Autumn Session are more properly called autumn or Budget sittings, although there is no official citation to which to refer.
proceedings, the resignations and demotions of ministers, the forced resignation of Speaker Jim Cope on 27 February 1975—all have been dealt with at length in other books and do not need repetition here.2

I now had a superficial knowledge about politics and Parliament. This was still more than most outsiders had then or have now. As I have seen in many other areas, this little knowledge gives rise to overconfidence, misinterpretation and complacency. It takes some years to understand that the world of politics is like an onion—one can see the vegetable but then one can peel off the skin and see another and different layer of the same vegetable—or perhaps a different vegetable. It is sad that so many of my newer colleagues still have to learn slowly by trial and error the subtleties and nuances of political life—just as I had to do in that first dramatic Parliament.

It was a period, too, during which I learned something of the operation of senate committees. I served on a committee chaired by Labor Senator Jim Keeffe that examined the dreadful environmental conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. We travelled as a committee to places I had never seen nor thought about, from Laura on Cape York to Oodnadatta, and to Cape Barren Island. It was very productive serving with experienced and skilful senators like Keeffe, Gordon Davidson and Neville Bonner.

Neville Bonner was my friend as well as being a colleague. Senators sit in pairs and Bonner and I shared one of the red leather couches in the chamber of the provisional Parliament House. On my first day there, he indicated that we should each put some cash in the dry inkwell and thereafter we drew on that ‘bank’ to pay for tea in the restaurant. On one occasion, too, I remember that during a speech I was enraged by Labor and so was provoking Labor senators to interject. I did not see the president rise to his feet to restore order and did not stop shouting out what passed for a speech. Bonner did not hesitate to take hold of my coat-tails and pull me back down with a surprised thud. He told me severely, ‘Whenever that man stands up, you sit down, my boy.’

In the Parliament that followed (when we were in government) we had Baume (the only Jew), Bonner (the only Aborigine), Lajovic (the only recent migrant) and Missen (the true liberal) all seated near each other; we used to laugh and call it ‘Cockroach Corner’—the place where all the unconventional and difficult people were put together.

2 See Fraser (1983: 357).
The story associated with a trip to Oodnadatta with my senate committee is worth telling. We had come into Oodnadatta, unwelcome to some in the small South Australian town and welcomed warmly by others. In fact, we found a community polarised about our visit. We had Lois O’Donoghue with us, who was at that time acting South Australian state director of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. She brought some supplies on the aeroplane for her mother, who still lived in the Aboriginal encampment just outside the town. She found that her mother had suffered an injury within the previous 24 hours and so was away from us for much of the day arranging medical attention for her.

We stayed at the Transcontinental Hotel in Oodnadatta, a remote town in arid country and at that time on the main train line between Adelaide and Alice Springs. Because of a mouse plague, all exterior doors on the hotel (including those leading from the bedrooms to the wide verandahs) were kept shut and we could open doors only from our bedrooms to the interior passageway. We were allocated two to a room, my companion being Gordon Davidson.

The first difficult moments came at our public meeting in the evening. Some locals attempted to have us answer their questions, their general thesis being that too much was being done for blacks. Jean Melzer, a member but not chair of the committee, set the matter right by leaning across and saying in a voice she had probably used in some tough political meetings in Victoria: ‘Let us get it straight. This is our meeting and we will ask the questions.’ It was a most effective intervention and stopped the interlocutors dead.

After the meeting, we returned to the hotel, had some drinks and then retired to bed. Jean Melzer and Lois O’Donoghue were in one room, Davidson and I were in a second room, Jim Keeffe and the pilot were in a third room. We had not long gone to bed when there was a great commotion and the publican, apparently drunk, came up the passage roaring words to the effect of ‘Where is he? I’ll kill him! Let me at him! I’ll kill him!’ There were great noise and movement outside, with the publican’s wife vainly hanging on to his arm and begging him to settle down. Not sure who was about to be killed, I searched my own conscience and, finding it clear of any immediate offence, then whispered, ‘Gordon, are you asleep?’ Gordon Davidson answered in a whisper, ‘What do you think? Of course I’m not!’ We got up and peeped out, to see the faces of Jean Melzer and Lois O’Donoghue just up the hall, peeping out from their room. We saw no sign of Jim Keeffe.

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4 Later Lowitja O’Donoghue.
The noise continued somewhere close by at a high level and we retired to the relative safety of our beds. Then a local policeman appeared and took control. He subdued the publican but then a new problem presented itself. The publican’s wife, in desperation, had locked herself and her baby in a bedroom opposite ours and the publican would not or could not provide a key to allow the door to be opened. Eventually the local policeman put his shoulder to the door and splintered it, so allowing the rescue of the wailing infant and its mother. The publican was taken off by the police and the wife and baby were taken off by neighbours. Somewhat shaken, we went back to sleep—eventually.

In the morning, we did not know what to expect. We need not have worried; someone had cooked some breakfast and no mention was made by staff of the horrendous events of the previous night, of the shattered door still swinging on its hinges, or of the absence of the publican and his family. We never did confirm who it was the publican had intended to kill, or why.

When we went to Laura in north Queensland, I had some education of a different kind. We were there to see the Quinkan caves and Aboriginal cave paintings and were in the care of Percy Trezise, but discovered on our arrival in this tiny Cape York hamlet that the local graziers had erected a small stockyard in the middle of town and stocked it with cattle to make a point to us about the unmet need for beef roads to serve the cape.

It was on this trip that I discovered the cane toad. The shower for the little pub was a communal affair separate from the main building and with corrugated iron roof and walls. The walls did not extend from top to bottom so that anyone having a shower was visible—as to his or her head, and lower legs—from outside. This also meant that cane toads, abundant in the area, could come freely into the ablutions block, which they did regularly. So, to have a shower one had to shoo out the cane toads and then continue to discourage them while one washed. My daughter remembers me coming home and telling her about these toads, which are poisonous if eaten. She remembered the story incorrectly, believing that the toads were aggressive and that their bite was poisonous. She wondered then, aged nine years, what dangerous and crazy occupation her father had got himself into.

It was on that same trip that the local Aboriginal community took us out for a bush barbecue. It was only after it finished that I learned that I had eaten barbecued bush tucker—that is, barbecued indigenous wildlife. As a Jew, I wondered vaguely later whether all the bush tucker had been kosher; I neither knew nor worried terribly much.
During the autumn sittings there was also my work as secretary of the Policy Committee of the Parliamentary Party, chaired by Don Chipp, who was then the relevant shadow minister. For the record, he was good to work with and he taught me a lot I needed to learn, and I feel nothing but gratitude towards him for his tutelage during this time. He in turn has described me as ‘an able and sincere senator from NSW’ and also included me in his list of 45 parliamentarians from the Thirty-Fourth Parliament (1984–87) whom he ‘rated as capable of making a significant contribution to this country in a government’.5

At this stage, I still spent two hours weekly (7–9 am on Mondays) consulting in my medical rooms at the North Shore Medical Centre. These were patients with whom I had a long-term relationship and some old patients whose difficult problems the local doctors did not wish to treat. In any event, I was at that stage anything but secure in my new political role and kept a small practice running as a hedge against an uncertain future. This was something I continued until late in the decade when I gained promotion and became unable to provide proper ongoing availability to my patients.

On Sunday, 12 January 1975, I flew to Jakarta as part of an Amnesty International mission to Indonesia. That country had arrested tens of thousands of its citizens at the time of an internal uprising in 1965 and had held many of these people, without trial, in custody for a decade. Amnesty selected a team led by Dick McGarvie (then president of the Victorian Bar Council) and including Neil Gilmour (then president of the Australian Council of Churches), Dr Dick Klugman (then Labor MP for Prospect in New South Wales), Lenore Ryan of Amnesty International (Australia), and me. We had with us an Amnesty International officer (W. Huang) who was to service our delegation and to whom we gave cover and protection.

Arriving in Indonesia late in the afternoon, I found myself held up at immigration. I had, with some difficulty, obtained a visa for Indonesia before leaving Australia. No doubt I was photographed and observed by security while my (valid) visa was questioned, examined endlessly and checked again and again. Our delegation was not welcome in the country just as I had not been welcome at the airport, and for the next 10 days we were studiously not received by the officials we approached. It did not matter that we were not ‘received officially’. During all this time, our Amnesty officer made a lot of contacts and gathered a large amount of information—doubtless followed by security all the time.

I doubt we achieved the release of any political prisoners, but it was one means of concentrating attention on Indonesia. Also, we were able to gather material that was disseminated worldwide by Amnesty to inform a wider public of the vast number of breaches of due legal process by the Indonesian authorities.

Sometime soon after my election I had established good contact with radio station 2WL in Wollongong through Brian Surtees. During most of 1975, I did radio segments for 2WL—commentary on politics rather than straight news—to ‘balance’ that by local ALP members. This meant that I commented before, during and after the constitutional crisis. I also recorded radio segments irregularly in Newcastle. At the same time, I maintained active constituency work, particularly in the western suburbs of Sydney.

My children were both attending primary school on the comfortable and privileged upper North Shore of Sydney. They attended private schools, which expected regular parent attendance and participation—which they got from us. Demanding as political life was, it was still an improvement on the medical life I had left, so we found it possible to improve our family life even with the full schedule demanded of us by politics. This seems to be an indictment on the life demanded of successful consultant physicians, then and now.

Also at this stage I was regularly writing a column for the AMA Gazette, a fortnightly newspaper produced by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) that went to a majority of Australian doctors. It had the advantage of making me more widely known and the disadvantage that some of what I wrote enraged the readers. It was at least a rich source of letters from doctors.

In retrospect, the forcing of that 1974 election was an error by our leadership, though, of course, it helped me. Had Snedden and his colleagues been more patient, 1975 would have seen a normal election at which Labor would have been defeated handsomely and without the disruption and crisis that are now part of history. The events of 1975 were also a mistake—they were unnecessary—as I have said elsewhere.6

Matters began to heat up when Malcolm Fraser became Leader of the Opposition on 21 March 1975, and took the fight to Gough Whitlam in Parliament and to Labor generally in the country. Until then the Opposition had not matched Whitlam in Parliament and did not enjoy the support of the community.

6 Nolan and Hocking (2005).
A story about that change of leadership: Malcolm Fraser had challenged Bill Snedden for leadership of the parliamentary Liberal Party in November 1974 and lost on that occasion (actually Tony Staley’s motion to have the leadership declared vacant was defeated).

My relationship with Snedden had always been ambivalent. On the one hand, I admired his relative liberalism and his innate decency; on the other, I had always resented his refusal to allow me to attend the first meeting of the parliamentary party after my election (my result was not then known with certainty), possibly because he could not be certain of how I would have voted in any showdown. It was reported to me that Bob Cotton objected strongly on my behalf and actually opposed Phillip Lynch for deputy leader as a protest. But Snedden’s failure to handle Whitlam was his final undoing; above all, we wanted someone to win for us and it seemed that only Fraser could do it.

When Fraser challenged again in March, the fortunes of the Opposition were even worse than they had been four months earlier. On the Sunday before the decisive leadership ballot, almost all NSW Liberal senators and members gathered quietly at my home in Gordon to discuss what our attitude might be in the forthcoming vote. This meeting has never until now become public knowledge; it was our desire to keep it secret that led to no invitation going to the late Bill McMahon. It was at that meeting that we agreed that a change of leadership was necessary. There has been a lot of speculation about the change of vote by the NSW bloc, but it has not been known generally that the change was formalised at a meeting in my home on that Sunday, 16 March 1975. The change in leadership duly occurred at a meeting of the parliamentary Liberal Party on Friday, 21 March 1975.

The party meeting of 21 March was tense and difficult. It has been described accurately in some books, to which interested readers are directed.\(^7\) That it could be described so accurately by outsiders is a measure of just how readily the proceedings of the party meetings—supposedly private—were (and are still) conveyed to journalists in return for favourable treatment. The role of a freshman senator in that titanic struggle was to say little, let the warriors battle it out and make some rational judgment for himself. I remembered the unpleasantness of the earlier challenge to Bill Snedden’s leadership when the ‘spill’ motion was unsuccessful. It is a matter of record that the spill motion succeeded in March 1975 and Fraser became leader. I seem to remember that John Gorton got up and walked out when this happened. He later sat as an independent and retired from the Parliament at the next election when he was

\(^7\) See, for example, Kelly (1976: 116, 128), where the change of NSW view is discussed without any reference to the meeting on that Sunday.
unsuccessful in attempting to win a Senate place for the Australian Capital Territory. It was a sad event as I admired him greatly as a person and as prime minister.

By the time the autumn sitting finished, the Government looked pretty awful. The loans affair was already running, the ministry had been destabilised, the speaker had resigned after being repudiated by his party in a vote in the House, public confidence in the Government was evaporating, and there was speculation even then that the Liberal and Country parties might try to force an election before year’s end, using tactics similar to those used in April 1974.

We were certainly giving the Government a hard time in the Senate. Many years later, at a social function, Lionel Bowen, at the time acting prime minister, referred to the Senate as the graveyard of legislation. That was a typical House of Representatives and typical executive view. The Senate is, and will be for many years, a chamber where one must negotiate and compromise to get legislation through; such a course does not appeal to members of the House of Representatives or to ministers of the Crown, all of whom expect the views of the Government to prevail unchallenged in the Parliament at all times.

During the first half of 1975 we considered 132 Bills. Of these, 90 were passed by both Houses, 22 were negatived (in the Senate), one was laid aside in the House of Representatives, three were discharged in the Senate and one was referred to a senate committee. So the Government continued to have a tough time and we continued to reject about one-quarter of all its legislation. Looking at it the other way round, the Government, even without a working Senate majority, still managed to get about three-quarters of its legislation through Parliament.

The strain on Senate ministers was intense and several collapsed physically. First, there were fewer ministers in the Senate than in the House and therefore each Senate minister had a heavy load representing colleagues in the House. This meant that Senate ministers had the problem of trying to pilot difficult measures proposed by House of Representatives colleagues through the hostile Senate. Second, the Government did not have control of the business or procedures of the Senate and so had a miserable time trying to organise and implement a program to meet government priorities and needs. Third, because the Opposition could dictate some of the procedures, it was possible for Opposition proposals to be introduced and debated, and for debates to continue for as long as the Opposition decreed. I did not envy Labor Senate ministers their situation.