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*Dr Sharman Stone
(Member for
Murray, Victoria)*

Two Members of the House of Representatives from different sides of the political fence, but they have more in common than most people would realise. Both are from regional electorates that have had challenging issues to face in recent years. Both are responsible for high profile portfolio areas on top of their normal electorate duties. Both are committed parents, with all the responsibilities that involves. And both have managed to complete a doctorate while working as a Federal Member of Parliament.

Dr Sharman Stone (Member for Murray, Victoria) and Dr Stephen Martin (Member for Cunningham, New South Wales) have faced many challenges in forging careers in Federal politics. Many people would wonder why they sought the additional challenge of fitting a PhD into their busy lives. The answer can be found in the approach they bring to politics.

For Sharman Stone and Stephen Martin, politics is not simply a case of winning votes, or getting the numbers in the party room, or staying in power. It's about the intellectual rigour that you need to bring to policy making so that the decisions you make are well thought through, can stand up to reasoned argument, and actually achieve what you set out to achieve.

For both of these Members, it wasn't a hard decision to take on a PhD. They knew that they could match the subject matter of their research with their interests in economics and international relations. They recognised that the study they would be required to undertake would help to hone their skills in researching and analysing issues and reaching thoughtful conclusions. They relished the opportunity to do something that reflected why they entered politics in the first place – to take on a challenge that would be of broader benefit and to see it through to a successful finish, no matter how tough it got.

Sharman Stone, who is Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, was awarded her doctorate from Monash University last year after completing her research analysing how cultural differences, industry structure and regulations impact on export trade. In particular her thesis compared how Australian Statutory Marketing Authorities (SMAs) and food manufacturers managed supplier-buyer relationship building with Korean counterparts and Japan's giant Trading Houses (such as Mitsubishi and Mutsui).

Her research identified the strategy and product characteristics which developed buyer-supplier loyalty that was strong enough to withstand regulation changes, subsidised competition, or a crisis like product contamination.

Dr Stone's interest in researching the business side of agriculture stemmed not only from her position as the Member for a regional electorate. It also derived from her work as a Rural Sociologist, as well as her work with the Victorian Farmers' Federation, with the Victorian Department of Agriculture and as Manager of International Development for Melbourne University.

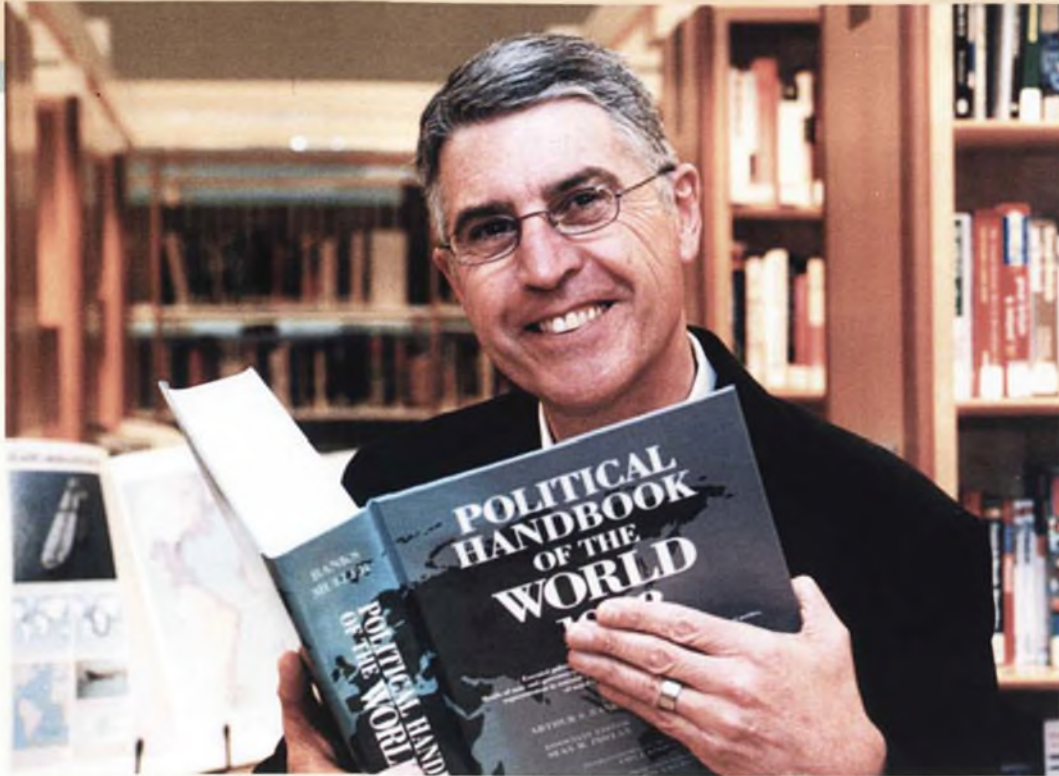
"When I decided to undertake my PhD," said Dr Stone, "I was determined to tackle something that was connected with Australia's future regional growth. I wanted to research an area that focused on productivity and innovation, where solutions could be offered and where there was strong potential for economic expansion."

For her thesis, Dr Stone focused on the Australian wheat and dairy industries, undertaking eight company case studies located in her Murray electorate, Western Australia and Tasmania. Japan and Korea were chosen as the markets for examination due to their significance for Australian agriculture commodity trade. Dr Stone spent months in Korea and Japan, learning both languages.

"Japan had already officially opened its doors to Australian food imports," Dr Stone explained. "However, Korea was still restricting market access. This provided me with effective comparisons of government to government intervention and changing competition in the market place.

"By tracing wheat and dairy exports from the 1930s and from paddock to plate into North Asia, I was able to distil what constituted effective regulation, market organisation and strategy at different stages of market evolution," Sharman Stone said.

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*Dr Stephen Martin
(Member for
Cunningham,
New South Wales)*

"This evolution included Australia attempting to move from commodity to more value added products, and the emergence of heightened environment and health consciousness in consumers."

One of Dr Stone's conclusions was the enormous significance of long-lasting, close interpersonal relationships between some key individuals within the buyer or supplier export networks. These relationships, many spanning decades, were often key to Australian product competing in the markets where the competitor's price is often subject to domestic politics, not the costs of production, demand or supply.

"Australia and North Asia's emerging culture of short-term contracts for highly mobile employees means less of these key job-for-life, company-loyal individuals," said Dr Stone. "This will mean alternative strategies are needed for building network loyalties and avoiding dependencies in the future."

Sharman Stone is hopeful that, through greater understanding of trade networks, corporate cultures, the impact of different government interventions and industry structures, Australia will become more competitive in international food trade.

Having completed her research, there is at least the opportunity for others to benefit from Dr Stone's efforts and from the knowledge that she has acquired.

Stephen Martin, who is Shadow Minister for Defence, considers that his study also will be of broader benefit and may inspire some of his colleagues to take up postgraduate studies. His thesis, for which he recently received his doctorate, explored the importance of financial deregulation in bringing about economic development.

The issue of financial deregulation has been of longstanding interest to Dr Martin, who chaired the landmark parliamentary inquiry into the Australian banking industry in 1991. His belief that Australia had to reform its financial markets if it wanted to be a relevant player in the global economy prompted him to undertake further research on the issue through postgraduate studies at his local university, the University of Wollongong.

For his thesis, Dr Martin focused on three case studies involving deregulation – the float of the Australian dollar, the entry of foreign banks and the sale of the Commonwealth Bank. All took place while Labor was in Government during the 1980s and while

Dr Martin was a Government Member of the House. He interviewed at length the key leaders of these major policy changes, including former Prime Minister, Paul Keating; former ALP Cabinet Minister, Senator Graham Richardson; Managing Director of the Commonwealth Bank, David Murray; and former Governor of the Reserve Bank, Bernie Fraser.

"I strongly believe that economic development means growth and jobs, and this helps people overcome poverty," Dr Martin explained. "I highlighted this in my thesis and explored how economic growth can be achieved through financial deregulation. This was my broad case study. It was really how Labor became New Labor and why the ALP needed to do this to remain relevant. It is the philosophical base that Tony Blair used to reinvent the British Labour Party and win them government."

While economic growth was the focus of Dr Martin's thesis, personal development is one of the side benefits that he has gained from doing his PhD.

"When I was the Speaker (from May 1993 to April 1996), I found the work really interesting and it was time intensive, but it just wasn't intellectually stimulating as I wasn't a Minister with a policy focus," Dr Martin explained. "I really enjoyed the inquiry work and research I had undertaken in the Banking and Finance Committee and I wanted to further explore these areas. My doctorate gave me the opportunity to put down my ideas and then it forced me to prove them."

"Undertaking university studies while working and being a parent is a lesson in perspectives. I always thought that I had good time management skills, but these were honed to perfection when I had to juggle family, work and study commitments."

"I tried to make sure that each weekend I had time set aside when I could study. But with four active teenagers and a time consuming job the study often lost out. I found the best place to concentrate on my notes and get through all the reading material was on aircraft travelling between parliamentary and electorate duties."

Both Stephen Martin and Sharman Stone agree that fitting postgraduate studies into already hectic lives required a strong commitment and much discipline. They also agree that now, more than ever before, you need such commitment and discipline to be effective as a Federal parliamentarian.