



Member for Farrer (NSW), Sussan Ley (left) and Member for Ballarat (Vic), Catherine King. Photo AUSPIC

New voices in the House

Twenty first-time Members were elected to the House of Representatives at last year's federal poll. *About the House* talked to two of them about their reasons for entering politics.

Sussan Ley, 39, is the new Member for Farrer (southern NSW), which includes the large regional city of Albury. Catherine King, 35, is the new Member for Ballarat, Victoria.

The two have some remarkable similarities—and plenty of differences.

Both are the first women ever elected to represent their electorates (in Farrer after more than 50 years, in Ballarat after 100 years). Both represent regional electorates with large regional cities at their centre (Ballarat with a population of about 76,000; Albury with some 50,000—closer to 80,000 if you add the 'twin' city of Wodonga on the other side of the border). Both achieved electoral feats by taking seats from opposing parties. Both are degree qualified in economics, as 'second' careers. Both are passionate about good regional policy, and made it a centre-piece of their first speeches to parliament.

As for differences, one is Labor (Catherine King), one is Liberal (Sussan Ley). One has a young family (Sussan Ley has three children, aged 13, 11 and nine), the other does not have children—at least, not yet. One was perhaps always destined for political involvement; the other seems to have been more of a late convert.

Born in Nigeria, Sussan Ley migrated to Australia with her parents after a childhood in the Middle East. Her first career was as a commercial pilot. With commercial piloting jobs scarce, especially for women, she became an air traffic controller, working at both Tullamarine and Mascot. She also found work as an outback pilot—aerial stock mustering for a shearing contractor. She met her now husband, John, who was working as a shearer and saving to buy and improve his family farm. Sussan Ley became a shearer's cook, and eventually married the fourth generation family farmer. They have been in the wool industry for 15 years, riding out the rural recession.

While running the farm and raising her family, Sussan studied at the regional La Trobe University, graduating with a degree in economics. She went to work with the Australian Taxation Office in Albury (eventually becoming Director, Technical Training) and earned Masters degrees in accounting and tax law. She was elected as the Member for Farrer after a seven-month campaign, taking the seat for the Liberal Party from the National Party (Farrer was the seat of the retiring former National Party Leader, Tim Fischer).

With such a varied background, why did Sussan Ley choose politics, especially given its reputation?

"I don't think you really consider the reputation of a profession before you enter it. I think you consider what you want to achieve and how best to do that. Having said that I am certainly aware that the reputation is pretty poor, and if I ever forget that I'm reminded of it, usually very soon," says Sussan Ley, laughing.

"Going into politics was something I wanted to do to try and make a contribution to rural and regional Australia. It just seemed the best way to do that. I've been married to a fourth generation family farmer for 15 years and, because of the tough times that I've seen the rural community that we've been involved with going through, that's inspired me to want to make change.

"I studied economics when my children were small as I went about training myself to go back into the workforce, and I learned a lot of theories, but when I came home to the small rural community where I lived I couldn't quite see how those theories were going to play out in practice. We need something a little bit more for the regions and the farmers, and that's important to me."

After gaining a BA from the Philip Institute of Technology, Catherine King began her working life as a social worker in Ballarat. She was the Victorian Young Achiever of the Year (Community Service) in 1991.

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She has worked as an industry policy officer with the Australia New Zealand Food Authority, been a Director in the Population Health Division of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, and a senior manager with KPMG Consulting. She has completed a Masters in Public Policy majoring in economics at ANU. In November she won the marginal seat of Ballarat for Labor from the Coalition (the only Labor person to do so, nationwide). Her 'politicisation' began quite early.

"I've been involved in politics since my early 20s," Catherine King says. "I guess for me there's two things. One is about public policy—I'm very passionate about good public policy and making sure you get the balance right between social and economic arms of policy. And I'm also very passionate about my community and representing my community because as a young social worker, when I originally started working in Ballarat, there were lots of things that I saw happening to people that I couldn't fix. They were things about what was happening to the social security system, and job opportunities for people—they were outside of my control, and largely outside the control of the families I was working with, and that's where my interest in politics started to happen.

"When I won the Victorian Young Achiever award I had the opportunity to go and work with a social worker in Birmingham (UK). It was just after Thatcher had left and John Major was in, and I was just devastated by what I saw. I saw major utilities that had been privatised. From my own personal point of view, when I tried to rent a house, get the water connected, get the phone connected, get access to postal services—I couldn't



Sussan Ley making her first speech in the House. Photo AUSPIC

believe the cost of things, and I was earning in English pounds at that time.

"I looked at the infrastructure of the place—I was working with homeless young people—and it was just appalling to see the lack of services for those people, the lack of access to benefits; what had happened when they cut the welfare state in the UK. I got really scared that that was going to happen in my country, and so that's how I got involved in politics. It's easy to sit on the outside and talk about how terrible things are, but I think you've got to get in there and participate and see if you can change things if you're really serious, so that's what I did."

While the two share some concerns, they have different approaches to regional policy.

Says Sussan Ley, "There will always be agreement about the 'problem', if you want to define it in those terms, or what people want, because we hear from our constituents, and we hear the same things. I doubt that there will be much agreement on the best way to provide the solution. Having said that, I don't like playing 'party politics' in my electorate, because people don't want that. People don't want party politics to get in the way of working together to get good outcomes. I've always said that a government is only as good as its opposition, and we need good opposition."

She raised a raft of regional development issues in her first speech. These included further developing markets for Australian producers; strategic location of industries and service providers; building/supporting secondary industries based on primary products (value-adding); providing telecommunications and other infrastructure; sharing the costs of 'public good' conservation measures; and addressing the failure in the market for venture capital, possibly with a new regional development bank.

Many are areas which have been probed by House of Representatives committees. The House Industry Committee, for example, recommended in its value-adding inquiry that the Treasurer establish a public inquiry into the zonal taxation system, focusing on options for developing a business zonal taxation system, and enhancing the zonal taxation rebate for individuals.

"There's pluses and minuses with a lot of these things," Sussan Ley says. "Enterprise zones I'm not entirely in favour of, because it's a bit of a 'picking winners' approach, although it has been very successful in America. We have different demographics, which means it wouldn't necessarily work as well here.

"And when you consider altering any policy, there are only limited resources—we don't have endless funds to put things in place, no



Sussan Ley campaigning in Farrer (NSW).

matter how good they sound. It's a question of allocating for competing demands, which is the unenviable task of the Treasurer. The committees play a very useful role and do influence policy-making, but there are still always those imperatives about the resource issues which hit home at the end."

Catherine King agrees the approach to regional development must be multi-faceted.

"We always talk about urban policy and this thing called 'regional and rural' policy, and no-one's quite sure what it actually is," she says. "But the people in my electorate get a little bit sick of being labelled as 'different' and 'other'. They are Australians who just happen to live outside of a capital city, and that means that sometimes getting access to services, getting access to education and training opportunities, making sure economic development of the region occurs, all of those things which are sometimes more difficult.

"All policy must consider what are the impacts on people living outside of metropolitan areas. Why are we locating a new facility here? Is there any reason it can't go into a regional centre? When we are looking at infrastructure funding, what are the impacts of our decisions on cities and towns, what are the impacts on localised jobs? All those sorts of things are the filters you have to run all policy through. Regional policy is not just an 'other' area, it covers every area of public policy."

Catherine King also identifies large infrastructure projects that are desperately needed in her electorate. These include the proposed Wimmera-Mallee pipeline, the Deer Park bypass and other roads, and access to natural gas and quality water supply.

"Very few of my small towns have access to a natural gas supply," she says. "Because of the recent increase in LPG prices we have seen the dangerous situation where some community members are now not using heating during winter, particularly some older people whose health is a little bit more precarious. In some of the towns in my electorate you can't drink the water out of

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New Members of the House of Representatives. Photo: AUSPIC

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the tap—those are third world conditions in a country with the wealth and prosperity of Australia. It is not good enough. These are some of the large infrastructure things that need to be done. Every electorate will have similar things, but my job's to fight for mine, and use whatever leverage I can in opposition to get them done.



Catherine King campaigning in Ballarat (VIC).

"There are also other services, whether they be postal, telecommunications, access to general practitioners, access to aged care—all of those things continue to be problematic. And it's hard, because economies of scale don't always allow it—if you look at it from a purely economic point of view—but from a social point of view it actually makes eminent sense, because of the impact on the quality of people's lives. It's trying to get the balance right between those things, and regional policy is a good area to do that."

She is keen to use the House committee system to broaden her experience. "I'm secretary of the urban, regional and rural development caucus committee, on the Labor party side of it, and I see that as an opportunity to pursue that particular policy interest. I also have broader policy interests. I have a Masters in public policy and an auditing background as well, so I'm quite keen to look at a larger focus than rural and regional policy. Part of being new is that there's a lot to learn—a lot to learn quickly—and I want to step outside my comfort zone a little bit to do that. So whilst I'm very comfortable with health and social policy and urban and regional development policy, I want to have a bit more of a tack toward

economic development and industry policy, so I'll have a look toward the House and Joint committees for those opportunities."

Catherine King and Sussan Ley have been 'new' MPs for four months now. On a personal level, has life changed for each since they were elected?

Sussan Ley says, "I've always been the type of person who has packed an enormous amount of things into a day—sometimes I wonder about that because they didn't all get done successfully—but as far as being a person always on the go, that hasn't changed."

She is conscious, though, that finding time for family is going to be important. "It's something I have to manage carefully, and it's something we all have in common here. We all realise just how precious our family is, and time spent with them becomes very special.

"But I'm aware that there are people in the electorate who also don't get to see their family very much either. We have to be aware that these are problems in working men's and women's lives, and the fact that we're experiencing them may help us put policies in place that alleviate these sorts of stresses on families and family life. In a way that may be a useful thing for us to experience.

"But I've just got my commercial pilot's licence back. I haven't flown in 13 years, so I'm a bit rusty, but in flying the huge electorate of Farrer, which is nearly 100,000 square kilometres from the bottom of the NSW border, it allows me to meet commitments in the electorate and still get home at night, which is fantastic. For example, I was able to go to the Wakool show, which is a fair way out west, and spend three hours there, and fly home again, and still be home for tea. If I had to drive, there is no way I could have done that. I'm very lucky to be able to do that."

Catherine King's life has changed, but "in a good way".

"Whilst I'm incredibly busy and don't have weekends or any of those things, previously I was a candidate for almost two years and I was also working, for the first year full-time, then three days a week in quite busy, demanding jobs. And I commuted from home in Ballarat to Melbourne and back two



"You've got to get in there and participate," says Catherine King.

days a week. So having this as my full-time job is just fantastic, because it means all the things that I've wanted to do, that I talked about during the election campaign, I now can turn my full-time energy to actually doing."

She identifies getting the balance right between Canberra policy work and Ballarat electorate work as a challenge.

"That is, making sure that the constituents in my electorate get the best possible service I can and having their voices heard up here (in parliament), and getting the policy work done. Getting that balance right is the hardest thing, and I'm sure I haven't got it right yet. Whilst I like coming up here, I really love to get home. That's my space, my electorate. On the road from Ballarat to Stawell, that's where I feel at home, that's what I like. It's not just that it's a marginal seat, it's that it's my home, and where I love being."

The final word goes to Sussan Ley.

"When we came up for our familiarisation session at the end of January, which was very valuable, one of the things that I really got out of the session was when the Speaker Neil Andrew told us that when you stand up in the parliament 'yes, try and remember where you are, but it's good if everything you say can come from the heart and mean something to you, and mean something to your electorate'. That's a standard that I want to set for myself. When you speak in this place it's got to be something that you really believe." ■