

ROBERT CLARK: STUDENT 1969-1970, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT 1988-2016



Robert Clark has been a Member of the Victorian Parliament since 1988, initially representing the electorate of Balwyn before it was abolished in a re-division of boundaries. Since 1992 he has been the sitting Member for Box Hill.

In 2009 he was the Shadow Attorney-General and Shadow Minister for Finance in the Victorian Opposition. Robert Clark is married with 2 children, and lives in Surrey Hills.

When did your parents come to St Albans?

I think they bought a block of land in 1948 in Beaver Street. As with so many of the streets in St Albans at the time, it was unmade and flooded in winter. I remember wading out in the street in my gumboots and it was great fun as a boy, but probably not that much fun for the grown ups.

Again, as with so many other families, my folks built their place one room at a time. I think by the time I arrived they were just finishing off the second bedroom and finished it off on my arrival.

It was a weatherboard house and access to building materials was very tight because of the war. I gather many families would have found that to be a major problem. I know that my dad was enormously proud that he was able to source some genuine terra cotta roofing tiles; they were scarce as hen's teeth in those days.

They bought the property in 1948 and then travelled to England in 1952; I think they were gone for 6 or 9 months. I was born in 1957.

What was their reason for coming to St Albans?

Probably cheap land, to be honest. At that time Mum was living in Altona. Mum's family had migrated when she was a young girl, I think when she was about five. They lived in various places but settled in Altona. Dad was posted with the RAF and was posted to India and came via Australia. He met Mum at a dance in Melbourne and they got together and lived happily ever after. He was demobbed back to Melbourne after the war. They lived at Mum's parent's place for a while before moving out to St Albans, which is not too far from Altona, of course, on the same side of town and accessible by public transport.

They were like so many others who were determined to make a new life after the war; people from an enormous range of backgrounds. Certainly my impressions as a youngster was that everybody was determined to pitch in together to establish a new life and put the horror of war behind them.

What was your dad doing post-war in terms of work?

He did a mixture of things. He'd been an aircraft mechanic in the air force. After he was demobbed he worked in my mother's father's business as a professional photographer for a while, but he then went back to being an aircraft mechanic. I think he worked at the government aircraft factory at Laverton or Point Cook. Then he transferred to TAA and worked at Essendon for many years. Later he moved to the maintenance base at Tullamarine when that opened.

Yes, aircraft mechanics would have been in demand at the time. It was a growing industry.

It was, both for Reg Ansett and the government airline. Both of them were fierce competitors and had a very strong loyal workforce - that was my impression. I well remember the children's Christmas parties that we used to have out in the hangers at Essendon, and occasionally we'd get a look inside some of the aeroplanes and climb on the wings, have a wander inside, something like that.

What are your early memories of St Albans?

I remember Errington Reserve, the gates there, the big double gates and the side gates. When I was a bit older I would climb up on the stone shoulderwork and I was so proud I could stand on the top of that. They had a slide and swings inside and I remember getting a mighty whack from the flying swings. Once you've been whacked by that you remember it.

One of my early memories was of the kindergarten. I went to the Church of England kindergarten, that was the Martha Arms kindergarten. The great fun and biggest thrill was when we were allowed out to play on the tricycles. Unfortunately I was one of the slower runners, so I usually ended up with an inferior tricycle, but it was all good fun and terrific.

We've become very used to driving around these days, but growing up it was mainly walking everywhere. We were in Beaver Street, south of St Albans High School, across from Percy Street. Every day that I had kinder Mum used to walk me down to kinder, with my sister in a pusher. Kinder was about an hour and half or something like that, so Mum would come home and later would come back and collect me.

I remember when I was a bit older walking to Sunday school at the Church and walking back alone through the back roads then. There's a laneway behind Alfrieda Street that ran parallel to Alfrieda; there was a grocery store there on the corner. It retrospect it's interesting how safe we were walking around the streets. I would have been about ten through about twelve I suppose, maybe younger in the days at the Sunday school. We'd walk there as a bunch of kids and walk back again and the parents wouldn't think twice about it. These days you don't let the kids out of your sight.

People talked a lot about how safe St Albans was. I suppose now you would have to be a bit cautious.

In Beaver Street for a long time we were near open paddocks and then the new estate came along and we had that development along both sides of Stradbroke Drive. That was a great blow to me because I used to go mushrooming through there. I would hop over the back fence and come back with a load of mushrooms at the right time of year. Also when I was a very young boy there was a grass fire that was threatening our house and mum got me with the sister-in-law standing on the front porch with instructions to take the pusher out onto the street if things got too bad. Mum was out in the garden spraying the back fence with the hose until the fire brigade came along. You'd often get grass fires around the area and have the fire brigade buzzing around.

I remember there being two different fire trucks, which always fascinated me. There was the CFA type with the ladder across its back, and then there was the high one with the sculpted sides with the water tank. I think one was an American style truck and the other one was English. There was a time when one of the trains in the siding was set on fire. That was a big commotion. Dad and a number of other guys went over to help before the fire brigade arrived. That would have been in the late 'sixties or early 'seventies.

I moved out of home in about 1976 or 1977. To me the real psychological change came in the early 'seventies, when there was a huge increase in the crime rate. Probably in retrospect it was still relatively low, but it was a shock at the time. I remember coming home from scouts in Percy Street and going to Beaver Street feeling a bit unsafe walking home at the end of the night; it was probably only 9 o'clock or so.

I suppose that's the 'sixties or early 'seventies when there was that change, but up till then you were perfectly safe. Mum would send me down to do some of the shopping, or would send me off to get my hair cut in the barber in the arcade off Main Road East. We would be sent there on our own ... I'm struggling to think how old I would have been: 7 or 8 perhaps. The barber would charge either two bob or two and six. We'd all sit there as kids and he would put us up in his barber's chair and snip, snip, snip, snip.

The other thing about that arcade was the fish and chip shop. I remember that well. For two bob you could get an enormous bag of chips and potato cakes that was wrapped in waxed paper and then in newspaper. It would be totally illegal these days, but it was good recycling then.

As a real treat we would often buy fish and chips when we'd been out for the day visiting my grandparents in Altona on the train. At 7 or 8 o'clock we'd stop to buy fish and chips on the way home.

The other character I remember in the arcade was the butcher. I used to go there regularly to buy offal, which we cooked up to feed our dogs. I'm struggling to remember the name, but I remember the face. He was an enormously genial and cheery butcher. Do you remember?

No. Grinhams was one of the early butchers, but I think they were on the other side. They were one of the long-established ones, I think.

Gilbertsons was there later on.

Yes, but then there were a number of little butchers-cum-delicatessens started in the 'sixties by the Europeans: Slavic people, German people. These days the small butchers are just not around any more.

The first butcher that I went to was for the offal. We almost only bought the offal there, because he was a continental butcher as I recall and had a range of cuts. Mum would get the more traditional Anglo-Saxon cuts at Gilbertsons.

Did you go the St Albans Primary?

I went to the St Albans East Primary. I started when I was four as I was born in March, so I would have started in 1961 or 1962 I suppose. The things I remember about the school are the egg drives. We'd bring along an egg or two as a donation for one of the hospitals. I thought that they were going off to hospitals. I presume they used them in their research but whether they actually cooked and served them I don't know. I've often thought how relative values change, because eggs were about sixpence each at the time, I think.

From St Albans East I went to St Albans Heights when that opened up. I think I was in the inaugural intake there. I think I was there for Grade 6, because I finished Grade 5 with Mr Sharkey at St Albans East. After the year at St Albans Heights I went to St Albans High School and I was there for two years, in 1969 and 1970. Then I sat the entrance exam for University High and was accepted for that, and I commuted there for the next few years.

How did you find the difference between St Albans High and University High?

At the time the main difference was the disciplined character of the school. When I started at Uni High I think most of the teachers still wore academic gowns and I think the Principal wore his mortar board at assemblies. That all changed very quickly. My first year at Uni High was the last of the traditional years. I think the Principal changed and the new Principal was more laid back. In retrospect, it's probably fair to say that the academic standards were higher, but I still think I had a terrific bunch of teachers at St Albans High and I feel guilty that I can't remember more of their names. Mr Nash was the woodwork teacher. He was a fantastic fellow, a stamp collector,

as I was. Mr Shaw was there as one of the senior teachers. Mrs Sturesteps taught German and was given an incredibly hard time by some of the students. Mt Hafez was a maths teacher of Egyptian background. Mr McInnery was the Principal, though I think he was there for only one year.

The High School, of course, has changed a lot. When I was there in Form 1 we were in a portable, which was where the library building is now located. We didn't have the assembly hall at that time, we held assemblies out in the open. I remember Mr McInnery giving us a very long harangue at one stage and I felt very wobbly at the knees for trying to stand still for so long.

The science teacher was a very enthusiastic fellow. He organized a team of boys to compete on "Its Academic". I was very disappointed because he made the selection from the Form 4 boys, and I was in Form 2 then. I thought it was a bit unfair that we weren't given the opportunity to participate. They were a good bunch of teachers. There was an English teacher - Mrs Wilkinson? – who encouraged me to sit the entrance exam for Uni High. It was a great spirit at the school, with very dedicated teachers. If you look back you realize how good and dedicated they were.

At University High my initial passion was Latin, which I did from Form 3, because the subject wasn't available at St Albans. I really loved that. Later on I became interested in legal studies and economics, which proly shaped my studies when I went to university.

I went to Melbourne University in 1975 and finished full-time in 1981, but then continued my studies there part-time. So I ended up with Commerce (Hons) degree in 1980, a Law degree in 1982, and an Arts degree in 1986.



Alex Andrianopoulos and Robert Clark at opening of the music centre.

Is this when you became interested in politics?

My family had always been interested in politics. It was a common topic of conversation at home. I think if Mum had had better opportunities, which she didn't have in the Depression, she might very well have become involved in politics and current affairs herself. That gave me an interest in political issues because we'd talk about them over the dinner table. As I went through Uni High it was a time of political upheaval in Australia with the Whitlam era, and the failure of the Whitlam era was in 1975, which was my first year in university. Even though my family did

not have a Liberal background by any means, I joined the Melbourne University Liberal Club and the Australian Liberal Students Federation when I went to university. I joined the Liberal Party in 1976.

Were there any particular leaders or groups that influenced you in that direction?

I think it was my exposure to economics, which was very strongly committed to the notion that you could have a decentralized system whereby people acting of their own initiative and exercise in control of their own lives could lead to a mutual and beneficial outcome through the economic system, that really impressed me. That was through my study of economics. From that my general support for individual freedom improved on that. Probably also the excesses and failures of the Whitlam era and how it was disastrous for the nation in particular.

When at university I became active in student politics. I held office in the Students Representative Council and was involved in a court case against the University, the Students Representative Council, and the Australian Union of Students. I was Treasurer of the SRC in 1976-77 and I thought that some of the money was being misspent, and people wouldn't listen to me saying "Hey, you can't do this." In the end I brought a court case against all three bodies, on the basis that the University was illegally raising compulsory student fees and was improperly handing them over to the SRC knowing they were going to be misspent, and then challenging some of the spending by the SRC and Australian Union of Students. Three of those claims were upheld in the Supreme Court. The judge held that the university was illegally collecting fees, and that the SRC and AUS were misspending some of their funds. The success of the court case resulted in changes to the law relating to student unionism in Victoria.

How old were you at this stage?

That was in 1977, so I was twenty. I was legally a minor then, because the legal age of majority was twenty-one. The fellow who became in legal terms my next friend had just turned twenty-one. He in effect was able to guarantee or take responsibility for my actions, so he was the one who had his neck on the line if I'd lost. At the time it was the thing to do, because it was my responsibility and these people were misspending the money and it was improper and shouldn't have happened.

Were you seen as a bit of a radical, taking up these public issues?

I suppose yes, but not in usual sense of the term radical, because radical is usually considered coming from the left of politics, which is on the other side of the spectrum.

I suppose for me radical means slightly unusual, because a lot of students, in my impression, would be happy to get on with their studies and leave that other stuff to someone else. It generally took a fair bit of courage to go out of the ordinary way and take up a public issue. It must have been a very good grounding to become further involved.

Yes. The risk with student politics for those who get involved in it is that they can end up neglecting their studies suffering from that, but on the other hand you get a grounding in the broader world that's probably invaluable. I suspect the fact I had been involved in that court case and done a few things out of the ordinary led me then to get articles with quite a good law firm, and I progressed from there. As a solicitor I was practicing in commercial, financial and labour law. Maybe if I had stuck with standard studies that wouldn't have happened. Who knows? But I ended up with a firm that looked after me very well and tolerated my ongoing political enthusiasm, and put up with me being a candidate unsuccessfully for parliament in 1985 and then put up with me being a successful candidate and leaving the firm in 1988.

I became more active in politics during the 'eighties. I was President of the Forest Hill Young Liberals from 1986 to 1987, an executive member of the Victorian Young Liberal Movement in

1986, and Vice-Chairman of the Deakin Electorate Committee from 1986 to 1988. I was a member of the Liberal Party's Constitutional Committee since 1987.

When you were at University High, were you travelling from St Albans?

Yes. I would cycle to the station, leave the bike against the railing, and hop on the train. I still remember the long wait at the railway crossing on occasions while the gates were shut waiting for a train to cross.

I left St Albans in my second year at university when I went to live in one of the university colleges. Initially, I'd lived at home and commuted by train because I didn't have a car. I got a drivers licence in my first year at university and moved into college after that, and subsequently into various shared houses around the area with my university friends.

After I left university and met and married my wife we settled in Parkville. When I was running for parliament we bought a place in the electorate of Surrey Hills and moved there. I was elected to parliament in 1988.

At that stage, you'd obviously had a career in law and you also had political interests. Was there a particular episode that made you think: "I'm going to stand for parliament," or did that evolve over a period of time?

I think it had been an aspiration, or at least a serious possibility, from some time during my high school stage, but don't ask me when. I think that midway through the time at University High I had in mind some sort of career in the public service, equally considering a possibility as a public servant in something like treasury policy. But I think by the time I got to university I had in mind that if things turned out I would be interested in running for parliament. Things turned out very fortunate for me. In 1985 I was unsuccessful for a seat called Waverley Province, which included Mt Waverley, Glen Waverley, and the Clayton area. Then I was chosen by the Liberal Party as their candidate for Balwyn in the 1988 elections, and I was elected then. That's nearly twenty years ago.

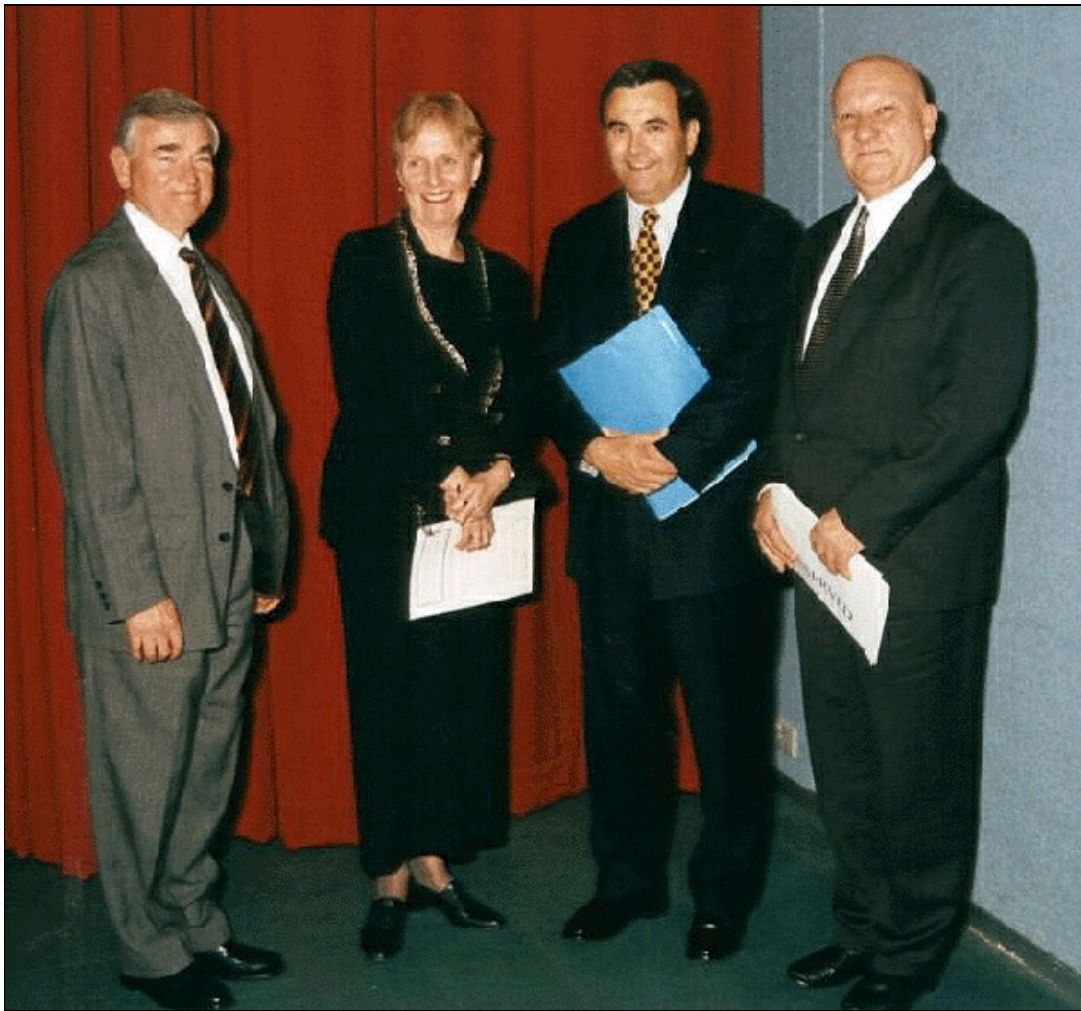
How have you found that time?

It has passed quickly. I suppose it falls into three distinct periods. In my first term we were in opposition. It was timed politically with the Victorian Development Corporation scandal with Pyramid and the Tri Continental Corporation, the collapse of the State Bank and the National Safety Council. It was a pretty rough time. The bottom fell out of everything. I think it was about the time of the recession we had to have: early 'nineties. From a Liberal Party point of view we were developing policies in the hope of being elected. That was the first era.

The second phase began when we went into government in 1992 and I was Alan Stockdale's parliamentary secretary. For me, having been a commercial lawyer, I was thrown into investigating corporate scandals and related problems. So my legal skills were put immediately to good use when I went into parliament. I was very fortunate to become Chairman on Alan Stockdale's backbench committee and over time worked very closely with him.

The third phase was later on from 1999 when we were back in opposition again.

They were pretty amazing times. There was still the threat of collapse of financial institutions and it was a very difficult budgetary period. Our second term was not so much reacting and responding to the crises at the times but more ongoing concerns. Clearly, the energy was in industry restructuring, transport, local government. A range of budgetary reforms that aren't particularly front of mind but are better accounting reforms and measures of what governments do.



Robert Clark with Stewart Homer and Andy Kratsis at St Albans High.

So your interest in economics has been part of the work you've been doing for a number of years.

Absolutely. I'm interested in the interaction of economics, social policy and the law. It's the management of government, how to run government well. A lot of that involves money, but a large part of it is how governments provide services. Money is simply a means of paying for the services that government needs to provide, so it's as much about how you deliver services as how you budget for it. The two are integrated. What you want is a government that delivers the right services and delivers them well. I think there has been a lot that's been neglected in measuring what governments actually do rather than just what they say. That's one of the issues I've been arguing for strongly, particularly over recent years.

I am Shadow Treasurer at the moment.

Can you see yourself continuing in that role? Would you like to be the treasurer in government?

Absolutely. There is so much better that we can do than we are at present. It would be great to have the opportunity to do it. That's up to the electorate, but we shall see. Times will change. The electorates these days are a lot more volatile than they used to be. People are more prepared to switch their votes. Governments are thrown in and thrown out. It is interesting to ask yourself what determines the voting patterns across suburbs. I think a lot of it is tradition, particularly in the northern and western suburbs that are Labor suburbs: we vote Labor and return Labor members. I haven't looked at the voting patterns for a while, but I recall maybe

twenty years ago you'd have about 30% of the vote would be Liberal. Rex Webb was a shoe shop proprietor in Main Road West who was the Liberal candidate for at least one year. That was pretty gutsy when 70% of the area was voting Labor. Rex was very hard working at the local government level.

Were you aware of politics in St Albans at the time?

Oh, yes. You asked how I became interested in politics. Every time there was an election I'd be keenly interested as an ankle biter as to what was going on. I remember grabbing all the "how to vote" cards from the folks and taking them home and asking all sorts of questions about the preferential system, which my parents struggled to answer. I remember Jack Ginifer, indirectly. He would come along to the scouts and open events. Later on when I was a mid-to-late teenager there was Jim Cairns. I remember doing a foolish thing in going along to one of his street corner rallies wearing a Liberal Party badge. Most people were very civilized about it, but I remember getting into a blazing row with some fellow who got very worked up about me being a Liberal. I remember Jim Cairns had a very big rally in the public hall section of the Maternal and Child Health Centre near Selfs. That was a big rally, so it must have been when he was a minister in the Whitlam government. He ceased to be treasurer due to some scandalous circumstances. That was probably my awareness at the time.

Coming back to your original question, I think one of the things that will make a change to the political dynamics is the new system of elections for Upper House seats, because it will mean there will be five MPs elected by proportional representation across the suburbs. That means there will be more of a mixture of representation.

Will that mean some of the smaller parties might get in?

It's possible. To get elected people need to get about 16% of the vote, either directly or by accruing preferences from other people. Probably the Greens will be the only ones of the smaller groups who have a realistic chance, unless there was an absolutely stand out independent, but they would have to be very well known as an individual because of the size of the seats. Realistically it will be Greens, Liberal, or Labor.

Do you think that the change is overall a good change or not?

The fairer thing about proportional representation is for the state Upper House to be elected as one electorate as they have in New South Wales, because that would allow the widest possible range of representation. The current system has been put together pretty carefully by the government to minimize the prospects of minor parties getting in. To me, the biggest regret of the change is now the Upper House MPs all go off at the one time, so you lose the continuity that was in the previous system where half would go each time. Also there is no capacity under the new laws for the opposition party to have control of the Upper House. So it will either be government control of the Upper House or minor parties with the balance of power, and that's going to lead to less stable results and less opportunity for either strong government or, if the electorate doesn't have full confidence in one government, then both parties need to have agreement for major legislation to go through. There may well be theoretical deficiencies but I think it's worked out well in practice. So I think it's not a good thing, but there are two silver linings. One is that areas like the western suburbs will have MPs from more than one party. The second silver lining is that there is now a fixed date for every election. That had bipartisan support.

Thinking back to St Albans, especially as your career has taken you out of the area, are your family still in St Albans or did they move as well?

They lived in St Albans until after Dad retired. Then they moved to Ringwood. Like many other parents they pitched in to help where they could. My father was involved with the scout movement, and involved with the project to build their brick building on Errington Reserve. When

I was involved with the cubs we would meet in the little military type Nissan hut. My mother was involved in the mothers club at St Albans East and I think at St Albans Heights as well.



Robert Clark and George Seitz at St Albans High 50th anniversary.

Did you continue any connections with St Albans, or did that stop once your family moved away?

Probably once Mum and Dad moved I didn't have any immediate connection left. For example, my friends from school days have moved. The closest I've back to St Albans is through my dentist in Sunshine, who has looked after me and the family very well.

But I do get occasional opportunities to visit the area. I was really delighted to be invited to the "back to school day" at St Albans Heights and the reunion at St Albans High. Previously I was invited to the 40th anniversary celebration at St Albans High. The Principal at that time got Alex Adrianopoulos and I to officiate in unveiling the plaque for the 40th anniversary. That was before the hall was renovated.

I was really impressed by my return to St Albans Heights a couple of years ago. I reckon the kids were better behaved on that occasion than we were in my days there. They were so enthusiastic and the Principal and the teachers were so keen. They took me round to just about every classroom, so I sang songs with the preps and watched the third graders putting together Powerpoint presentations. Some of the senior students pretended to be journalist and media people - they held a media conference and asked me all sorts of questions. We even did the traditional planting of a couple of trees. It was great. The school looked terrific and the kids were incredibly well behaved. They ran a very good school program. I was so delighted to see the school going so well.

Robert Clark, Parliament House, 2006.



2014 Update: Robert Clark is still the Member for Box Hill in the Victorian Parliament. He is also the Attorney-General, Minister for Finance and Minister for Industrial Relations.

More information is available at www.robertclark.net

Left - Robert Clark on the cover of the Law Institute Journal.

Interviewed in 2006 at Parliament House, Melbourne.