

## Report

**Congressional Study Tour with Congresswoman Janice Schakowsky  
9<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, Illinois March/April 2000**

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## Background

The Congressional study tour is generally conducted in Washington with the Australian representative spending time with a Congressman’s office or party organisation.

I chose to spend my time in a congressional district to get a better feel for politics at the grass roots in the US.

The information we have available to us in Australia on the national political scene in Washington is extensive. Anyone who is interested enough can follow the key political issues in the US through our own local newspaper, radio and television coverage. The web makes available all the additional information a keen Washington-watcher could desire - from American newspapers to the progress of individual bills at *Thomas.com* (the on-line library of congress). Members and Senators all have extensive websites that include their public statements and their voting records are closely scrutinised and exposed via the websites of the myriad lobby groups.

Local politics in the US, however, only hit the news in Australia when the issues appear extreme or novel. It was my goal to experience the local political life of a congressional representative first, and their Washington activities second.

## Congresswoman Janice Schakowsky

I worked with Congresswoman Janice Schakowsky, a Congressional “freshman” who was elected in November 1998. Jan represents the 9<sup>th</sup> congressional district of Illinois, an extraordinarily diverse section of Chicago.

The district stretches from Evanston in the north, a leafy suburb containing the prestigious Northwestern University and beachside mansions stretching the length of the Lake Michigan shoreline, to the high-rise public housing of the inner city suburbs further south.

The ethnic mix includes Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, Asian and African communities and household incomes span the complete gamut, from single parent families on meagre social security to wealthy two-income professional households.

While my period of study covered the primaries (what Australians would see as a public pre-selection), Jan faced no Democrat challengers in the Illinois primaries on March 21. The two Republican challengers who stood in opposition were not considered a serious threat to her position in the elections this November. Few politicians these days, however, are complacent about "safe seats" - and Jan is certainly one of them, not taking any vote for granted in a community where voting is voluntary, not compulsory.

Jan began her political career as a community activist. The very first campaign she was involved in was the movement to force manufacturers to put use-by dates on packaged food. She conceived the idea sitting in her kitchen talking with friends about sour milk. She set up a group called National Consumers United and eventually saw use-by dates become the standard for all American food manufacturers and packagers.

"Now when I feel the legislative process is so slow and nothing will ever get done," she says, "I go spend some time in the dairy section of a supermarket, just hanging around, watching people check the dates to remind myself that you really can get things done."

### **Setting the bar high**

Jan won her seat in November 1998 – following the retirement of Congressman Sid Yates who represented the district for 48 years.

Sid had a strong reputation for his small "I" liberal voting record, his fierce support for the environment and the arts and his yearly district surveys which allowed him to keep in touch with the views of his constituents.

He was, however, rarely seen in his district, living permanently in Washington and concentrating his political efforts in the Capitol.

Jan wanted to differentiate herself from her predecessor by ensuring a high local profile from the first days as a Congresswoman. The result, while politically rewarding has proved personally taxing. Jan has a Monday to Friday program in Washington where she serves as a floor whip and a representative on the Banking and Financial Services and Government Reform Committees, plus a weekend program of community meetings, functions and events in Chicago. She works extremely hard in both Washington and Chicago and is building a strong reputation with the Democrat leadership group in Washington for her hard work, fearless support of issues she believes in and excellent media savvy.

During my visit she was personally asked by the President to join his bilateral visit to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was a short notice invitation that appeared to come because Mr Clinton was deeply impressed with a speech Jan gave introducing him at a major function in Chicago. The trip was an opportunity for her to network even more closely with senior bureaucrats and congressional representatives.

## Working in the District

My work with Jan's district office in Chicago was focused on several of her key political themes at the time:

### The Census

Undercounting can have a severe impact on the federal funds allocated to a local district. A district such as Jan's, with a diverse population, a high proportion of low income families and non-English speaking immigrants, can suffer badly through undercounting. It is estimated that the number of children un-counted in Chicago at the last census would have filled 70 new schools.

Jan took a very high profile in her district to encourage people to fill out their census forms and be counted. She and her staff worked closely with the leadership of a range of ethnic and religious groups to ensure the word filtered right through the communities of Chicago to ensure a complete count.

There was also a political reason for her hard, concentrated work. If Chicago loses just 30,000 in population according to the 2000 census, it will probably lose a congressional district at the redistribution which follows the federal election. Jan's district is the most vulnerable for redistribution.

I traveled with Jan and her staff visiting high schools, elementary schools and Chicago Housing Authority seniors' buildings (high rise public housing for the elderly) as she delivered her census message. I also assisted in writing material for handouts on the census.

### Immigration

Jan, a first generation American, is a strong supporter of immigration and a vehement critic of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. Within her first year as a congresswoman, she had waged a major public campaign against the inefficiencies of the Chicago INS office, vowing to change its "the customer is always wrong" attitude.

She stood in one of the hundred-metre long lines that once snaked around the INS offices in Chicago with media representatives and interviewed people who had various horror stories to tell. There were mothers with kids who had waited several days in line only to be turned away at the head of the queue because the office had reached capacity for the day. There were others who had made it into the INS offices, only to be told they had the wrong forms and needed to start all over again. Her campaign jolted the INS headquarters in Washington and the result was the elimination of queues in Chicago, easier access to information for all immigrants and an increase of information and forms available on the INS website – which now sports the slogan "putting the S back into INS".

The congressional offices in Chicago (she has offices at three locations) deal constantly with immigration issues and Jan invites all immigrants in the district with INS problems to contact her offices for help with forms, getting information or filling in their applications.

While working in the local office, I prepared a background paper for Jan on H1B visas for visiting, working professionals.

There were, at that stage, six pieces of pending legislation on these “guest worker” visas which have created controversy between the business lobby which supports a major increase in the number of visas approved and the union movement which opposes employment for all but a minimum number of foreigners.

## **In Washington**

I spent three days in Jan’s offices in the Cannon building on Capitol Hill.

Her chief of staff Cathy Hurwit summed up the difference between the two offices this way: “In the district they deal with immediate issues, sometimes life and death issues like can someone who is under threat in a home country join their relatives in America? Here in Washington it’s much more general and complex as we deal with issues across the whole range of government. It is also generally much, much harder to get things done. Personally I’m not sure which is more difficult.”

During my time in Washington Jan was in India with the President. Her staff, however, continued to meet with the dozens of delegations that pass through the office in any one week.

As congressmen and senators do not vote on party lines in the US, each lobby group needs to canvass each representative individually which makes for a constant stream of visitors to the small, cramped quarters of the congressional suites. There are also delegations from the district and the State to the Washington office. The staff allowed me to sit in on meetings, listen and observe.

On the days I was there, the lobbying groups included firefighters, boilermakers, financiers, shopping centre developers, sugar beet growers and various community groups.

On my third day in Washington I took the opportunity of meeting with the organisers of the Million Mom March, an attempt to arrange a million women to march in centres around the country on Mothers’ Day in support of stronger gun control legislation. This major anti-gun demonstration was held on May 14 and media reports in Australia suggested it was a major success and likely to spur a new lobbying force for tougher firearm legislation in the US.

## **Committees**

Jan is a member of the Banking and Financial Services Committee and I spent a morning with her staff in public hearing by the Subcommittee on Capital Markets, Securities, and Government Sponsored Enterprises. The committee was considering the Housing Finance Regulatory Improvement Act. The hearing considered changes to the regulatory bodies that cover the government sponsored enterprises set up to make credit available to finance home purchases in those areas of the market in which private financiers are unwilling to operate. These are the Federal National Mortgage Association (called Fannie Mae) the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac) and the Federal Home Loan Bank System.

With nothing that quite approaches the theatre of question time in the Australian Parliament in the US congress or senate, these committee hearings often provide the real "drama" in terms of debate on public issues. This particular hearing was no exception with several vocal democrat representatives making it clear that changing the regulatory regime for the GSEs (through legislation proposed by the Republican Chairman) must not damage their ability to continue to provide low cost housing finance for groups disadvantaged in the private market.

### **"Message" meeting with the DNC**

While in DC, I had the opportunity to attend a message meeting – a regular meeting between congressional representatives and their staff with political operators from the Democratic National Committee and, in this case, the Vice President's office. The meeting was the first after the presidential primaries, which while not entirely completed, had become a fait accompli with challengers bowing out of their respective races.

Now that there was one Democrat candidate, the Vice President, the group talked about working together as one party for the federal election and working hard to follow common themes. This is probably a ritual that the parties go through following every primary campaign.

For April the theme was to be education. With George Bush Jnr declaring he wanted to be the education President, the Democrats intend to focus on his record in education early in the campaign. The Vice President was to begin spending full days in schools – beginning with talking to parents as they drop their kids off in the morning and ending with joining in the after school activities – to learn first hand the problems of the school system.

In May the theme was to be gun control, focussing on the Million Mom March on Mothers' Day.

It was fascinating to listen to the meeting, to see the research being produced on the Republican candidate's record and the propaganda materials provided to support individual campaigns in each State. One, for example, compared Governor Bush's record in Texas on a range of key public issues with the performance of every other state. It would have provided individual campaigns with some very effective material to be tailored to local concerns.

The goal of these meetings is to ensure, during the period from after the primaries until the party convention in August, that discipline is maintained, issues are consistent across the country and the agenda is set by the leadership group alone.

### **Conclusion**

My period with Jan Schakowsky demonstrated most clearly that the work of a federal representative in a democracy – if they intend to service their electorate effectively as well as fulfil their national role – is as difficult and exhausting in the US as in Australia. I consider myself privileged to have spent time with such a dedicated professional as Jan Schakowsky and her incredibly hard working staff.

I found that the media work in her office, the electorate servicing work and the committee work were all very similar to the activities I have experienced in the offices of politicians in Australia – it's simply on a much larger scale due to the massive population of the US. There are many more media outlets, many more sophisticated lobbying groups, many more community groups and many more issues to be considered.

The essential adherence to key policies, political realities and hard work, however, remain the same.

I would like to thank Jan and her office for the hospitality extended towards me during my time in Chicago. I would also like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for providing me the opportunity to travel to the US and spend time in Chicago and Washington. I fulfilled my goal of experiencing, first hand, the grass roots work of a politician in the US, plus I had some experience of the active side of congressional life in Washington.

The ideas and information I have gathered will help me in my continuing work with the Australian Labor Party and help ensure I am a more experienced and better rounded political professional in any future political role I may pursue.