

# **Andrew, John Neil: Speaker 1998–2004**

Clare Parker

John Neil Andrew, farmer and twenty-fourth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 7 June 1944 in Waikerie, South Australia, son of John (Jack) Clover Andrew, farmer, and his wife, Elsie. John senior was later chairman of Waikerie District Council, chairman of the Waikerie Producers Co-operative, and national president of the Australian Council of Local Government Associations. His son, using his second given name, grew up among the fruit-growers of his home state's Riverland region. He studied at Waikerie High School and then at Urrbrae Agricultural High School in Adelaide, where he completed the year eleven Leaving Certificate. On returning to Waikerie, Neil grew crops that included peaches, citrus, and grapes, and became a member of the local gliding club. He also became active in politics, joining the Liberal Party in 1967 and chairing its Waikerie Branch (1971–74). In 1971 he married Carolyn Ayles, a mathematics and science teacher at Waikerie High; they have three children.

In 1972 Andrew joined the Liberal Party State Council and chaired the electorate conference for the state seat of Chaffey (1972–75). He also played a leadership role among his fellow farmers, serving as a member of the South Australian Advisory Board of Agriculture from 1973 and later becoming its chair (1980–82). In 1975 he was awarded a Nuffield Foundation travelling scholarship to undertake a study tour of the British fruit industry.

Andrew's first experience of elective office was as a councillor for the District Council of Waikerie (1976–83). He chaired the Liberal Party federal electorate conference for the seat of Wakefield (1980–82) and, at the election of March 1983, was the party's successful candidate for this safe Liberal seat. Wakefield was then a rural electorate that stretched eastwards from the Yorke Peninsula through Andrew's native Riverland region and up to the state border with Victoria and New South Wales; it had once been held by the first Speaker of the House of Representatives, Sir Frederick Holder. The coalition's national loss at the March 1983 election meant that Andrew entered parliament as an opposition backbencher. He vigorously represented the interests of

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**Figure 4: Neil Andrew.**

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

Wakefield, drawing on his professional knowledge of agricultural, regional, and small business policy, and becoming the first rural South Australian federal member with an electorate office within their electorate rather than in Adelaide. As opposition deputy whip (1985–89, 1990–93), he gained an early grounding in the administrative and disciplinary skills required of a Speaker. He was Deputy Chair of Committees three times (1985, 1989–90, and 1993–94) and, as a member of the Speaker's panel in 1994, gained valuable experience presiding over the House.

In 1996, following the election of the Howard government, Andrew ran as a candidate in the party room election for Speaker but came third behind Kathy Sullivan and the winner, Bob Halverson from Victoria. Halverson had previously been opposition chief whip, and Andrew's elevation to government chief whip in July 1997 further strengthened his own credentials for the Speakership. The resignation of Halverson in March 1998 was followed by the brief tenure of former National Party leader Ian Sinclair. Sinclair's retirement at the election of October 1998 opened the way for Andrew's endorsement as his successor by Prime Minister John Howard. Andrew ran against the Victorian member David Hawker in the party room vote, arguing that his experience on the Speaker's panel showed that he was 'someone who's able to make bipartisan and fair judgments' (Lagan 1998). He won the ballot and was elected Speaker by the House on 10 November 1998, making him the first South Australian to hold the position since Sir John McLeay in 1966. Andrew publicly promised to celebrate with sparkling wine from the Barossa or Clare Valleys in his electorate. He continued to attend party meetings, arguing that it was in the interests of his constituents.

On his first day as Speaker, Andrew vowed to fully honour his obligation to 'apply the standing orders equally' (Denholm 1998). He believed that members of the House 'come into this place with a great deal more in common than we have dividing us', and called on them to work together to 'raise the standards of this parliament' (H.R. Deb. 10.11.1998, 8). Yet in just his second question time he condemned the disorder he saw before him as 'quite absurd' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.1998, 311). In August 1999, he ordered a security review after a man threw petrol bombs at the front doors of the parliament building and another member of the public suffered a fatal fall from its roof. Shortly before Christmas, he chose to overlook three members having briefly donned reindeer antlers in the House in fulfilment of a bet with journalists—a fleeting departure from his ruling that male members when in the chamber must wear jackets and ties, and that all members should dress suitably for 'the board room of the nation' (H.R. Deb. 11.3.1999, 3788). The introduction of the goods and services tax in mid-2000 spurred heated discussion, and on one occasion he suspended six members for unruly behaviour. This included the then employment services minister, Tony Abbott, the first suspension of a minister since 1961. Andrew also insisted that answers during question time be kept relevant—once in September 2000 ruling the acting prime minister, John Anderson, out of order on this basis.

By the end of 2000, Andrew was under pressure from both major parties—perhaps an indication of his impartial approach. Prime Minister Howard sought clarification of some rulings, and there were reports of dissatisfaction within the wider Liberal Party. Andrew responded that he was 'delighted if some of my own crew are unhappy' as 'I'm the umpire and there is always going to be distress on both sides' (Maiden 2000). His party colleagues stood by him during the most significant challenge to his Speakership, initiated by the opposition in November 2000. He had declined to require Abbott to withdraw a comment seen by Labor as implying that opposition member Cheryl Kernot had inappropriately received money when leader of the Australian Democrats. Labor moved that this ruling be dissented from, leading to controversy as the bells summoning members rang for only one minute instead of the customary four, preventing some from reaching the chamber in time. The result was a 57–57 tie, meaning that the Speaker had the casting vote (VP 1998–1999–2000/1935, 30.11.2000). Andrew declined to exercise this vote, stating: 'I do not believe that I should vote simply to maintain myself in office' (H.R. Deb. 30.11.2000, 23117). Because of the issue with the bells, he called another vote, which was resolved without a formal count because all opposition members had left the chamber in protest. Their leader, Kim Beazley, subsequently moved a motion of no confidence in the Speaker, telling Andrew that this 'unprecedented day' was the result of 'faults in your own rulings' (H.R. Deb. 30.11.2000, 23117). The opposition saw no proper basis for his having called a second division and alleged that in the first vote two coalition members had been wrongly permitted to enter the House after the doors were closed. Its confidence motion failed along party lines, 60 votes to 78 (VP 1998–1999–2000/1936–37, 30.11.2000).

Andrew soon admitted that the one-minute division was a 'wrong decision' (Crabb 2000). He had considered voting against his own position as Speaker, but decided that the issue involved was 'a pretty flimsy excuse to say "I'm off"' (*Australian* 1 December 2000, 1). Six months later, Labor moved an unsuccessful motion of dissent against another of his rulings, when he judged that a question from opposition frontbencher Anthony Albanese to the aged-care minister Bronwyn Bishop was out of order as it contained 'a specific imputation or inference' (H.R. Deb. 4.6.2001, 27141). Andrew presided when, in May 2001, the House of Representatives met in Melbourne to celebrate the centenary of the Commonwealth parliament; reflecting on the intervening century, he thought that, in 2001, 'the House is more accommodating of change and more tolerant of diversity' and 'the rules of the House are not as rigid as they once were' (*About the House* 2001, 19, 20).

Despite controversies, and the press opining that Andrew's performance 'severely undermines his authority' (*Australian*, 28 November 2001, 14), he was re-elected as Speaker after the Howard government was returned at the 2001 election. He defeated three other nominees in the party room ballot, again including Hawker. Opposition frontbenchers greeted his re-election by proposing major changes to the Speakership.

The new opposition leader, Simon Crean, suggested that the position should ‘alternate, by nomination from either side, for two terms’ (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2002, 5), with the Deputy Speaker being nominated by the other side of the House. Andrew responded guardedly that too much focus on parliamentary reform risked implying ‘that this chamber is some sort of disaster in legislative terms’ (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2002, 12).

The first several months of the new parliament were another testing time for Andrew, marked by accusations of bias against Labor. On 28 May 2002, he faced a series of challenges in the House. The opposition’s Wayne Swan moved a motion of dissent from a ruling that a question from one of its members was out of order. A second dissent motion arose from Andrew’s decision to expunge some words from the *Hansard* record of a few days earlier as being inappropriate language. After both motions failed, Swan attempted to move a censure motion against the Speaker but was quickly gagged by government members.

Andrew never supported wholesale change in how the Speaker was elected, believing that ‘whoever chairs the House of Representatives ... depends on a majority on the floor to stay in office’ (Oakeshott 2004, 22). A fully independent Speaker ‘wouldn’t change a thing’, as they would still be ‘philosophically more comfortable with one side than the other’ (Oakeshott 2004, 23). But he did during his second term consider some less drastic changes. A Labor proposal for a four-minute limit on answers during question time was ‘not a bad idea’ (Harvey 2002). He proposed the introduction of a question-and-answer period at the end of second-reading speeches to encourage more members into the House during such debates. Reportedly, he asked Abbott as leader of the House to temper his attacks on the opposition and to curtail the proliferation of ‘Dorothy Dixers’ during question time.

Security for Parliament House continued to be progressively tightened in response to such incidents as the discovery of a quantity of white powder in November 2002 that triggered an anthrax scare. Andrew hoped that this would be ‘carried out as unobtrusively as possible because I don’t want to upset the architectural integrity of Parliament House’ (*AAP General News* 2002). From February 2003, members were obliged to pass through metal detectors when entering the building. In March fifteen anti-Iraq War protesters were ejected from the public gallery of the House, and others draped banners from the roof of the parliament building. Andrew—‘distressed that this privilege of watching the parliament in action ... is abused by some who come simply to disrupt the parliament’ (*AAP General News* 2003)—joined with the President of the Senate, Paul Calvert, in introducing further security measures, including limiting public access to the grassy roof of parliament to individuals who had been screened when entering the building. Later that year, security concerns briefly acquired an international dimension when debate on Australia’s participation in the Iraq War and the visits on consecutive October days of United States president George W. Bush and Chinese president Hu Jintao sparked protests from visitors and

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some parliamentarians. President Bush addressed a joint meeting of both Houses in the House of Representatives on 23 October 2003, during which two Greens senators, Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle, interjected. After refusing to leave, both were named and consequently suspended for twenty-four hours. This prevented them from attending the address by President Hu the following day, and both senators queried the right of the Speaker of the House of Representatives to expel them. Andrew responded that the Senate had agreed to follow House procedures and that he had the full support of the President of the Senate.

The Bush and Hu visits also reignited an issue that had followed Andrew for much of his Speakership: press photography inside the House of Representatives chamber. The media had long complained about restrictions preventing both filming and still photography of members who were not currently speaking or of any form of unparliamentary behaviour, in order, as Andrew had told the press, to 'protect the dignity of proceedings' (Steketee 2000). Television images were available only from the parliament's official in-house broadcast. However, an American media crew that had been allowed into the press gallery during President Bush's speech took and subsequently broadcast footage of the Greens senators' suspension, which was shown overseas but not, initially, in Australia. This prompted the press gallery to again petition the Speaker to ease filming restrictions; Andrew remained firm, responding that 'what we are doing is fairly lenient and liberal by world standards' (Oakeshott 2004, 23).

Despite his reputation as a stickler for parliamentary rules, Andrew could be flexible. In 2003, he permitted a 'stranger in the House' during a division in the small shape of the eleven-month-old daughter of Labor member Michelle O'Byrne, who had not had time to find another carer in the rush to vote. The same year, he allowed members to text one another on mobile phones within the House, ruling this to be akin to the already permitted sending of emails via laptops. This balanced approach was consistent with Andrew's view of House traditions as 'silk threads of our democratic system of government' that 'possess the important qualities of strength and flexibility' (Andrew 2003, 287).

Andrew also contributed to important changes in the parliament's relationship with the public. He encouraged Australians to better appreciate its workings, particularly that much more went on than raucous behaviour:

If we allow the public to develop an image of the House based on snatches of Question Time incorporated into news and public affairs programs, we have only ourselves to blame if the public has a distorted view of the Parliament. (Andrew 2003, 284)

He supported the Parliamentary Education Office, the House's *About the House* magazine, and the establishment of the Liaison and Projects Office in the Department of the House of Representatives, which organised such programs as guest lectures at universities by parliamentarians and parliamentary officials. He was proud of his role in the 2004 amalgamation of the departments of the Parliamentary Library, Parliamentary Reporting Staff, and Joint House into one Department of Parliamentary Services, following a review by the Parliamentary Service Commissioner.

At the election of October 2004, Andrew retired from parliament. A redistribution had transformed Wakefield from a predominantly rural electorate into one that took in much of Adelaide's northern suburbs, making it nominally a Labor seat. He had already been considering leaving politics and felt that he had reached a suitable time for a change of career; as he told ABC Radio, 'I'm not looking to retire in the sense of going fishing' (*PM* 2003). True to his word, he then worked in roles that drew on his knowledge of government and his professional experience as a horticulturalist. He served on the boards of the Crawford Fund (chair, 2005–10), an organisation that supports international agricultural research; Citrus Australia (2014); and the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (chair, 2015–19). Keen to broaden his skills, he qualified as a mediator in 2008 and subsequently worked at the same law firm in Adelaide as his daughter.

Seen as 'sober and punctilious' (*Australian* 10 February 2001, 8), Andrew was long 'mystified about the level of negativity' (Starick 2003) among the public about parliament, yet resolutely 'proud of the role that the parliament plays' (*Australian* 7 May 2001, 7). He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering in 2006, and was appointed AO in 2008 for 'service to the Parliament of Australia through the advancement of parliamentary administration and reform, and to the community in the areas of agricultural research, development and education'. His portrait by Robert Hannaford that hangs in Parliament House had, thought its subject, successfully made a 'silk purse out of a sow's ear' (Oakeshott 2004, 23).

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