

Aston, Sir William John (Bill): Speaker 1967–1972

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William John Aston (1916–1997), mayor, milliner, and fourteenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 19 September 1916 at Mascot, Sydney, elder son of locally born Harold John Aston, barber, and his wife, Annie, née McKeown. Bill's father was 'quite content to go to the hotel and gamble and mix' (Aston 1986), leaving his wife and his sister, Ethel George—later a successful antique dealer—to manage the impact of the Depression on the family. Annie took in washing to earn enough to help clothe her children. The childless Aunt Ethel and her husband took young Bill in for eighteen months and, during the worst of the Depression, provided him and his immediate family with rent-free use of a cottage in the Sydney suburb of Waverley.

The Astons were Labor supporters—'rabid' in Harold's case, according to his son—but were not active in party politics. Ethel, far more purposeful than her brother and holding different political views, instilled in her nephew 'principles and her way of life' (Aston 1986), including taking pride in personal appearance and exercising care with money. Looking back, Aston felt that 'she had a greater influence on me than any other person' (1986). Following the family's move to Waverley, it was Ethel who insisted that he end two years of truancy by enrolling in Waverley Public School. From there, he progressed to Randwick Boys' High School to belatedly complete his Intermediate Certificate. Encouraged by an inspirational economics and business teacher, (Sir) Hermann Black, later chancellor of the University of Sydney, Aston secured employment with Jones Brothers Ltd and qualified as an accountant. Initially a company clerk, he gladly switched to commercial travelling, seeking out orders for millinery from country town department stores. He was mobilised in the Citizen Military Forces on 10 August 1940. On 22 December 1941, at St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Sydney, he married Beatrice (Betty) Delaney Burrett, a milliner. He transferred to the Second Australian Imperial Force on 30 July 1942 as a gunner. Promoted to lieutenant on 4 January 1943, Aston served in Port

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Figure 5: Bill Aston.

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1200, L21661.

Moresby the following November with the 82nd Australian Mobile Searchlight Battery. He returned to Australia in June 1944 and, when his unit was disbanded, was discharged on 15 November 1944.

The immediate postwar years were beneficial for the enterprising Aston. He and Betty established a successful millinery business, *Astyle Pty Ltd*, and in 1948 he was elected president of the Bronte branch of the Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia. A long-running dispute with Waverley Municipal Council over rent charged to the RSS&AILA drew him into standing for public office. A Waverley alderman (1949–53) and mayor (1952–53), he was approached by Wilfred Dovey, a Supreme Court judge and former Waverley alderman, and Jack Cassidy, vice-president of the Liberal Party's New South Wales division, who enquired about Aston's 'political persuasion' (Aston 1986). He replied that, although a Liberal supporter, he was not a party member, whereupon Cassidy arranged for his wife, Gwen, a party branch secretary at Vaucluse, to sign him up.

Aston narrowly won preselection for the eastern-suburbs federal seat of Phillip at the general election of December 1955. His campaign was aided by well-resourced party colleagues in the neighbouring blue-ribbon electorate of Wentworth, contributing to him winning 51 per cent of the vote in a two-party contest. During the campaign, he had left door-to-door canvassing—'not a very nice thing to be doing'—to his supporters, but as the member for 'a rough, scruffy old seat', he discovered that he sometimes had 'to give more attention to the seat itself than you do to the Parliament' (Aston 1986).

A further realisation concerned the lack of camaraderie among Aston's fellow parliamentarians; everyone was 'an ambitious man and everybody thinks that somebody else is coming in as a threat' (Aston 1986). He was avowedly ambitious himself and served on the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs in the hope that it would provide a stepping stone to the ministry. On 10 March 1960, the prime minister, (Sir) Robert Menzies, appointed him deputy government whip, but his initial tenure in this first-rung office was short-lived. At the election of December 1961, he was unseated by a 3.3 per cent two-party preferred swing to his Labor opponent, Syd Einfeld. He regained Phillip in November 1963 with a 4.2 per cent two-party preferred swing, and the following month was reappointed deputy government whip. Aston had misgivings about resuming what now seemed an inconsequential position as deputy to Peter Howson—someone with whom he struggled to gel, being 'from the Melbourne Club, very pukka English' (Aston 1986). But Howson was soon elevated to the ministry and, on 10 June 1964, Aston became government whip.

The new whip adapted quickly to a position he found akin to that of a sergeant major. As the parliamentary executive's go-between with the backbench, he gained 'a terrific insight into fellows' human nature' (Aston 1986). He and the Speaker,

Sir John McLeay, often invited government and opposition backbenchers to drinks at the end of a sitting day, creating opportunities to build support for Aston's growing interest in the Speakership as he continued to be passed over for the ministry. When McLeay retired at the November 1966 election, competition to succeed him was strong. According to Aston, McLeay favoured him as successor, but in the party room ballot on 14 February 1967 he was one of nine contestants. Aston narrowly defeated his main rival, Fred Chaney senior of Western Australia. He was elected Speaker on 21 February 1967, defeating the opposition's nominee, Bill Fulton, 78 votes to 43 (VP 1967/6, 21.2.1967).

The new Speaker soon established his authority in the chamber, but his tenure proved far more contentious than that of his popular predecessor. Aston's personal dignity suffered in January 1968 when he was involved in a supposed 'glassing' incident at Randwick Rugby Union Club. His right hand required twelve stitches, and a Waverley Council building inspector received seven stitches to a facial wound. Although a witness reported hearing words exchanged, Aston assured reporters that the whole incident was a mere accident. Meanwhile, his relations with a revitalised opposition became increasingly uneasy. Anger greeted his re-election as Speaker on 25 November 1969 when the House of Representatives sat for a single day to commence the twenty-seventh parliament. Opposition frontbenchers Kim Beazley senior and Clyde Cameron launched a blistering attack on Aston as a partisan 'lackey of the Prime Minister' (H.R. Deb. 25.11.1969, 9). As was then customary for Speakers who had served two terms in office, Aston was appointed KCMG in the 1970 New Year's Honours.

During his Speakership, Sir William faced two major outbreaks of disorder in the House. The first, and more serious, occurred during a late-night sitting on 8–9 April 1970, and was preceded by (Sir) Billy Snedden, leader of the House, controversially hindering the opposition's contributions by moving the closure of debate twenty-one times in the previous eleven sitting days. After he did so yet again, opposition member Gordon Bryant called Aston a disgrace and was duly named, whereupon Bryant's party colleagues defied the Speaker by refusing to act as tellers and then protectively crowding around Bryant to prevent the Serjeant-at-Arms from enforcing his removal. Proceedings were suspended and resumed at 2.15 a.m., just long enough for the Speaker to call on the opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, to use his influence to ensure compliance with the orders of the House. At 10.30 am, the House reassembled and Bryant apologised before complying by withdrawing from the chamber; Whitlam soon after admitted to having acted wrongly (Bennetts 1970, 1; H.R. Deb. 8–9.4.1970, 883–85; VP 1970/75–76, 8–9.4.1970). The second incident of disorder was on 11 June 1970 when five anti-conscription protesters chained themselves to the railings of the public gallery. Aston suspended the sitting while bolt-cutters were employed to release them. No charges were laid because of uncertainty about the applicability in the parliament of Australian Capital Territory law.

Aston took considerable interest in procedural reform, but was not successful in extending question time, nor in establishing House standing committees to inquire into policy issues, akin to those recently created in the Senate. Addressing the party room on 2 September 1970, Prime Minister (Sir) John Gorton made clear his objections to such committees, which Howson saw as ‘a slap’ at Aston and the Clerk of the House, (Sir) Alan Turner (Howson 1984, 654). Aston was chairman ex officio of the House Standing Orders Committee, which proposed major and controversial procedural change in a report that the House considered on 3 September 1970. A long debate, which ‘left the House in a complete shambles’ (Howson 1984, 654), began with Snedden circulating memoranda detailing a proposed new three-week cycle for future sittings, reduced time for speaking, and a smaller quorum requirement, indicating as he did so his own disagreement with some details concerning sitting times. Members were allowed a free vote, but the resultant amended three-week cycle that commenced on 13 October was not as efficient as anticipated, and in August the following year the committee successfully proposed a return to the previous arrangement (H.R. Deb. 3.9.1970, 987–1022; VP 1970/287–90, 3.9.1970). Reduced speaking times and smaller quorums proved relatively uncontroversial.

On 9 March 1971, Aston presided during one of the more notorious incidents in House history when the journalist Alan Ramsay shouted from the press gallery ‘you liar’ at Gorton during his response to Malcolm Fraser’s dramatic resignation as minister for defence. Whitlam moved that Ramsay be taken into custody by the Serjeant-at-Arms and brought before the Bar of the House the following day. Ramsay soon produced an abject apology, which he later recalled that Aston—not by this time a Gorton admirer—had helped him draft (*Late Night Live* 2018). The following month, Aston was the subject of a no-confidence motion during which the deputy leader of the opposition, Lance Barnard, denounced him as ‘arbitrary, capricious, inconsistent and undeniably partisan’, falling well short of the desired attributes of ‘dispassion and judicial calm’, and ‘fairness and impartiality’ (H.R. Deb. 21.4.1971, 1764, 1766). After a long debate, which included reference to the alleged ‘glassing’ incident, the motion was defeated along party lines (VP 1970–71/524–25).

As Speaker, Aston did not eschew a continuing party-political role. He told a June 1971 conference of parliamentary presiding officers and Clerks from the South Pacific region that a Speaker can, ‘to a great extent, wear two hats’ (Aston 1971, 34). One concerned responsibility for the orderly and impartial conduct of House business and the other—reflecting his experience in a marginal seat—arose from being ‘entitled to be the member for his own constituency’ (Aston 1971, 34), justifying campaigning for re-election, voting in committee of the whole, and speaking in the House on matters affecting the electorate. A Speaker may also, he added, choose to attend party room meetings, but he maintained that he did not regularly do so himself and never spoke at them. He instead made direct representations to the relevant ministers, including the prime minister, if warranted. One such minister was Snedden, who

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considered Aston 'a bit of a wheeler-dealer, always trying to settle things' (Snedden and Schedvin 1990, 215). Another serious clash with the opposition occurred on 14 October 1971, after Aston accused Whitlam of having uttered 'untruths' during a televised interview on the Australian Broadcasting Commission current affairs show *This Day Tonight* about Aston proposing to use the issue of abortion law reform for political gain. A tense but inconclusive public exchange followed.

Aston remained Speaker until he was defeated in Phillip at the election of December 1972. In retirement, he was a director of a small public relations company, Neilson McCarthy, and chairman of Kolotex Holdings Ltd, Australia's largest manufacturer of women's hosiery. He died from heart failure and dementia at Vacluse Nursing Home on 21 May 1997, and was buried at Waverley Cemetery. A large, portly man who cut an imposing figure in the Speaker's chair, he was blessed neither with a notably impressive voice nor with his predecessor's lightness of touch. His portrait by William Pidgeon hangs in Parliament House. Aston was survived by his wife and their two daughters; his son, Raymond (1943–88), was the member for Vacluse in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly and minister for corrective services at the time of his early death.

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