

Bishop, Bronwyn Kathleen: Speaker 2013–2015

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Bronwyn Kathleen Bishop, lawyer and twenty-ninth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 19 October 1942 in Sydney, eldest of three children of New South Wales-born Thomas Francis Setright, engineer, and his South Australian-born wife, Kathleen Annie, a professional singer. Bronwyn attended Roseville Public primary school and Cremorne Girls' High School. Her parents imparted to her a strong sense of public duty and confidence that she could achieve whatever she set out to do.

Bishop acquired from school studies of world history a firm conviction 'that individuals could make a difference' and, accordingly, aspired from an early age to have 'a say in what happened to my country' (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4397). Growing up in a solidly Liberal-voting area, she was drawn to the Liberal Party's ideology of individualism and free enterprise. As a university student, she joined the Killara Young Liberals and discovered that the branch had a sub-rule specifying that only a male could be president, and became determined to change this.

In 1960 Bishop commenced studies in law at the University of Sydney (1960–65), but she did not become active in student politics. In 1966 she married Alan David Bishop, a solicitor and future judge. They were to have two daughters, Angela and Sally, and divorced in 1992. Bishop did not complete her university studies but instead gained a professional qualification from the Solicitors' Admission Board in 1967. While a young lawyer, she acted in the television drama *Divorce Court* and delivered radio broadcasts on legal subjects.

From 1974 to 1987, Bishop made repeated attempts to secure preselection as the Liberal Party candidate for a state or federal seat, her only success being an unwinnable position on the ticket for the New South Wales Legislative Council in 1981. Nonetheless, she remained a tireless worker for the party and had more success in ascending the ranks of its organisation. She was president of the Balmoral branch (1973–79), a member of the state executive from 1980, chair of the annual

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Figure 11: Bronwyn Bishop.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

state convention (1981–85), and became the first female president of the New South Wales Liberals (1985–87). In a period of growing ideological tension within the state party, she recalled that her attainment of the presidency involved ‘one of the dirtiest fights I think I ever had to be in’, and attributed her victory to ‘the ordinary people in the party’ (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4398). Her confidence and determination made a great impression on political friends and foes alike. She proved to be a markedly interventionist president, effectively ‘both a chairman of the board and a managing director’ (Hancock 2007, 247).

Election to parliament finally came at the 1987 federal double dissolution. Bishop was only the second female senator for New South Wales, and the first popularly elected, contributing to what one journalist came to see as ‘her difficult to define quality of being newsworthy’ (Farmer 1994). The new senator made a very public point of placing her office not in central Sydney but at Parramatta in the city’s west. In May 1989, the newly reappointed Liberal leader, Andrew Peacock, elevated her to the opposition frontbench as shadow minister for public administration, federal affairs, and local government. Aided by a prodigious capacity for hard work and an ability to function with little sleep, she clashed repeatedly with government senators—notably, the foreign minister, Gareth Evans, who rhetorically pondered ‘Why do so many people take an instant dislike to Senator Bishop?’ and supplied the answer himself: ‘It saves time’ (S. Deb. 18.8.1992, 20). Such a view was, however, disputed by her acquaintances outside politics, who saw a more amiable side to her.

As a member of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, Bishop for the first time attracted national attention in her televised appearances in 1992 in which she questioned government officials, including the commissioner of taxation, Trevor Boucher. Her strident tone and persistence sparked angry and public clashes with the committee chair, the Labor member for Barton, Gary Punch. Another and perhaps more substantive Bishop initiative challenged the prosecution of Midford Paramount, a clothing company alleged by Australian Customs Service investigators to have avoided paying duty on clothing it produced in Malaysia. Bishop, conscious that the company was in danger of going out of business, played a major role in highly critical findings that helped it to win compensation. She sat on innumerable other parliamentary committees, including as chair of the House Standing Committees on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2002–04), Family and Human Services (2004–07), and Communications and the Arts (2015–16).

After the Liberals unexpectedly lost the 1993 election and their leader, John Hewson, appeared to be struggling, Bishop benefited from a series of opinion polls suggesting she was the publicly preferred leader. In January 1994, she was appointed shadow minister for urban and regional strategy. She resigned from the Senate the following month to stand at a by-election for the safe Liberal House of Representatives seat of Mackellar. Despite Labor not running a candidate, she suffered a swing against her

of more than 4 per cent in the primary vote; suggestions that she might attain the party leadership began to fade. After Alexander Downer replaced Hewson as leader in May 1994, she was moved to the more senior shadow portfolio of health. Her stated tolerance of tobacco advertising attracted widespread criticism, including from the president of the Australian Medical Association, Brendan Nelson, later a federal Liberal leader. In January 1995, Bishop was shifted from the shadow health portfolio into privatisation and Commonwealth–state relations.

Following the election of the government of John Howard in March 1996, Bishop became minister for defence industry, science, and personnel. After the October 1998 election, she was moved to the aged-care portfolio, in which capacity she introduced mandatory national standards for aged-care providers. This drew her into what became known as the kerosene bath scandal, when the media reported that residents of an aged-care facility in Melbourne had been bathed using a kerosene solution as a supposed cure for scabies, and took this to be indicative of negligence by Bishop's department.

Bishop lost her place in the ministry after the election of November 2001. That year she was awarded a Centenary Medal for her service in parliament and government. She nominated in the party room for the position of Speaker in November 2004; David Hawker was instead chosen, but Bishop was added to the Speaker's panel. After the defeat of the Howard government, she held the shadow portfolios of veterans' affairs (2007–08), seniors (2009–13), and special minister of state (2010–13).

Despite serving on the frontbench under Peacock, Hewson, Downer, Howard, and Nelson, Bishop never attained cabinet rank. When her friend and supporter Tony Abbott became prime minister in September 2013, she was instead proposed for the Speakership. Unusually, she was nominated in the House by the prime minister, who said he could 'think of no-one more likely to deal with all of the other formidable characters in this place without fear or favour' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.2013, 6). The leader of the House, Christopher Pyne, added as seconder that 'poachers usually make very good gamekeepers' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.2013, 6). In accepting the nomination, Bishop spoke of how she cared passionately for the traditions of the House and 'for what it represents, in looking after the welfare of the people of Australia' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.2013, 11). The opposition nominated the member for McEwen, Rob Mitchell, but Bishop was elected by 93 votes to 56 (VP 2013/6–7, 12.11.2013).

Bishop saw her Speakership as 'the capping of my career' (Ireland 2015). She was the third woman in the chair, after Joan Child and Anna Burke, and the first from outside the Labor Party. Like both previous female Speakers, she did not wear a gown when presiding. At the outset, she declared her 'ambition to bring dignity back into the chamber' (Chang 2013). But she soon attracted controversy, including criticism from her predecessor as Speaker, Anna Burke. Bishop continued to attend party room meetings and readily entered into political debate outside the chamber. She was the

subject of accusations of marked bias against the opposition, particularly for her rigour in ejecting members for misbehaviour during question time. On 27 March 2014, the manager of opposition business, Tony Burke, moved to suspend standing and sessional orders so as to further move a motion of no confidence against the Speaker, on the grounds of ‘serious partiality in favour of Government Members’ (VP 2013–14/444, 27.3.2014). This was defeated along party lines.

Some specific decisions by Bishop also drew widespread comment—notably, her October 2014 banning of burqas in the public galleries as a security risk, a measure that was soon retracted. The greatest controversy she faced as Speaker arose in July 2015 over what the media dubbed ‘Choppergate’. Eight months earlier, she had claimed \$5,227 in travel expenses for chartering a helicopter to fly from Melbourne to Geelong and back to attend a Liberal Party fundraising function. Although she voluntarily repaid the cost of the flights, plus an additional 25 per cent, and stated that her claim was within the guidelines, public criticism grew, particularly after it became known that she had made other sizeable travel claims. After three weeks of scathing public and media comment, on 2 August 2015, she resigned as Speaker and went to the backbench. This was followed by a government review of parliamentary entitlements to address the evident discrepancy between the formal rules and community expectations.

In December 2015, Bishop announced that she would recontest Mackellar at the next election. But the following April, she was defeated for preselection and announced her retirement from politics. Reacting to the news, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called her not merely ‘unforgettable’, but also ‘dynamic, colourful, charismatic’ (Dole 2016). Bishop departed politics as the longest-serving woman parliamentarian in Commonwealth history. A portrait by Jiawei Shen in Parliament House is more suggestive of her warmer side than her better-known persona as a political warrior. At the unveiling, she recognised her late-life status as a model for younger women by commenting that ‘if things are a bit more difficult because you’re a woman, don’t waste your time and your effort whinging about it. Use that time and effort to overcome it, because it can be done’ (Koziol 2018). In retirement, Bishop became a commentator for *Sky News*. She retains her longstanding interest in music by serving as a patron of Opera Australia. In 2020 she was appointed AO.

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