

# **Bowden, George James: Chairman of Committees 1959–1961**

Sylvia Marchant and B. J. Costar

George James Bowden (1888–1962), farmer, soldier and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 17 March 1888 at Moyhu, Victoria, son of William Henry Bowden, farmer, and his wife, Catherine Christina, née McCalman, both Australian born. George was educated at state schools at Whitfield and Benalla, and later worked as a labourer and a commission agent in Melbourne. Enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force on 6 March 1915, he served with distinction with the 24th Battalion. He was wounded at Gallipoli, promoted captain on 16 January 1918, and then gassed and wounded on the Western Front. For his daring reconnaissance under fire and leadership in attack at the battle for Mont St Quentin, France, in September 1918, he was awarded the Military Cross.

On demobilisation in July 1919, Bowden commenced farming at Koo Wee Rup, West Gippsland. In 1923 he joined the United Country Party (UCP) and became a member (1928–38; president, 1930–31) of the Cranbourne Shire Council. In August 1932, he lost his farm to his mortgagee, but soon after was granted land as a soldier-settler. He contested the Victorian Legislative Assembly seat of Mornington in 1935 and 1937 as a Country Party candidate, but was narrowly defeated both times.

Bowden became prominent in Country Party affairs during a period when the party dominated Victorian politics and was experiencing dramatic internal dissension. The expulsion of (Sir) John McEwen for joining the Lyons–Page federal coalition government in 1937 precipitated a splinter Liberal Country Party and created a serious rift between the Victorian branch and the federal Country Party. Simultaneously, Premier (Sir) Albert Dunstan was engaged in a bitter dispute with the party powerbroker Albert Hocking over the executive's attempts to direct the state parliamentary party. Bowden was not highly visible on matters of policy or strategy, other than strongly supporting the Victorian party's opposition to entering into a coalition.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 13: George Bowden.**

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC/10450 LOC Box PIC/10450.

A Hocking supporter and a vigorous opponent of the Liberal Country Party, Bowden served as vice-president of the UCP (1938–39). Despite further financial troubles and the loss of his soldier-settler land in 1938, he became UCP president in 1940. That year he unsuccessfully contested the federal constituency of Gippsland against Thomas Paterson, a former deputy leader of the Country Party and fervent supporter of the breakaway Liberal Country Party, who had held the seat since 1922. Bowden was re-elected as UCP president in 1941 and 1942 and, though opposed by three candidates, narrowly won the final ballot for president in 1943. Victorian Country Party unity and harmonious relations with the federal organisation were restored that year, but Bowden played a relatively minor role in the negotiations because of his military commitments. Having been mobilised in October 1939, he was appointed temporary lieutenant-colonel on 13 March 1942 and commanded the 9th Garrison Battalion, Australian Military Forces, from that month until October 1943. He was transferred to the Reserve of Officers in December.

Bowden remained determined to win a seat in parliament. Success finally came in August 1943 when Paterson retired and campaigned for Bowden in Gippsland. Although his military record did not prevent his being heavily outpolled in the servicemen's vote by the Labor candidate, W. T. G. (Wally) Williams, he won the seat on preferences in the face of a Labor landslide. Under Bowden, Gippsland became an increasingly safe Country Party seat, peaking at 73 per cent of the two-party preferred vote in 1955.

As a member, Bowden was a regular and eloquent contributor to debates, including through sharp interjections. He had a particular interest in such constituents' concerns as employment preferences for returned servicemen and servicewomen under the Re-establishment and Employment Act, banking legislation, rural issues, and the aluminium industry. Sir Robert Menzies later recalled him as 'looking like a benign grandfather, while at the same time shooting the arrow of argument with deadly accuracy into what he believed to be wrong' (H.R. Deb. 7.8.1962, 9). He could also be a determined operator in the chamber when seeking to promote a favoured cause. One of his more publicised moves arose from his moving on 15 June 1945 the adjournment of the House to discuss a definite matter of urgent public importance—the diversion of fodder from Victoria to feed New South Wales pit ponies, thereby delaying until later in the day the resumption of a major debate on the Commonwealth Bank Bill. This created headlines for several days, even as the minister for commerce and agriculture, William Scully, pointed out that the government had already decided to direct some fodder back to Bowden's home state. Overall, though, his parliamentary career was solid rather than spectacular. He never attained ministerial rank but became Chairman of Committees on 17 February 1961.

In the chair, Bowden was an impartial and reasonable arbiter, for the most part limiting himself to maintaining order in debates. He could be stinging in his rebukes on rare occasions, but more often was calm and efficient. On several occasions, he clashed with Eddie Ward, the member for East Sydney and long a bane of non-Labor Speakers. On 3 September 1959, Ward earnestly inquired as to whether a reference by (Sir) Billy Snedden to Fred Daly as 'Dilly-Dally' was out of order (H.R. Deb. 3.9.1959, 933). In August 1960, Bowden suffered a heart attack during a sitting of the House. A particularly stern test came three months later when he struggled to maintain order during a long debate on the sabotage provisions of the Crimes Bill. Ward and the Labor member for Eden-Monaro, Allan Fraser, were both named by Bowden. The member for Yarra, Jim Cairns, insisted that Bowden had erred in not requiring Prime Minister Menzies to withdraw an imputation that he was a saboteur (H.R. Deb. 22.11.1960, 3114). Bowden resigned as Chairman of Committees on 7 March 1961 due to ill health and did not stand at the federal election of the following December. Arthur Calwell described him as 'one of the best Chairmen of Committees that this chamber has known', not least as 'he tried to govern with a light rein' (H.R. Deb. 8.3.1961, 25).

Noted for his keen sense of humour, Bowden was well liked by his parliamentary colleagues. Almost six feet tall (180 centimetres), he retained his erect soldierly bearing and was in demand as an Anzac Day speaker. He never married. When his health deteriorated due to his war wounds, his sister cared for him at his Murrumbena home in suburban Melbourne. He died on 8 June 1962 at the Repatriation General Hospital, Heidelberg, and was buried in Cheltenham cemetery. Gough Whitlam recalled during the parliamentary eulogies for Bowden that, as Chairman, he had drawn on his wartime experiences 'to command a group of spirited men who had human feelings' (H.R. Deb. 7.8.1962, 10); (Sir) John McEwen added similarly that he had 'sustained the kind of discipline that is seen in a democratic parliament without any semblance of the iron fist' (H.R. Deb. 7.8.1962, 11). According to Whitlam, Bowden's impartiality had waned only once when, carried away by a colleague's rhetoric, he interjected from the chair 'Hear, hear!', only to quickly regain his composure and rebuke himself by calling 'Order!' (H.R. Deb. 7.8.1962, 10).

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