

Burke, Anna Elizabeth: Speaker 2012–2013

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Anna Elizabeth Burke, twenty-eighth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born in Melbourne on New Year's Day 1966, one of five children of Bernard Burke, an electrician employed by the Commonwealth Bank, and his wife, Joan Margaret, a kindergarten teacher and teacher-librarian. She grew up in a working-class environment in suburban Ashwood, in Melbourne's south-east. Her parents passed on to their children their own shared 'drive and determination to make the world a better place—to show us, through their Catholic faith, a struggle for social justice' (H.R. Deb. 5.5.2016, 4510). Bernard took on additional jobs part-time to help pay for his children's school fees, including operating a newsagency. Anna attended Presentation College at Windsor, Melbourne. Despite dyslexia that resulted in her sitting her Higher School certificate exams orally, in 1984, she won a place at Monash University to study arts.

Burke recalled that, as a student, she 'just wanted to get a good degree that would help me probably crack a graduate job somewhere' (Barrett 2018, 36). Nonetheless, she enthusiastically entered into wider university life, joining the Newman Society and making many friends. She was elected a student representative on the arts faculty council and her political engagement was further inspired by attendance at an International Year of Peace conference in Melbourne in 1986. In 1987 she joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) branch at Ashwood and the following year became a local delegate to the state ALP conference, rising to become branch president. Despite sensing that student politics was too limited for her rapidly broadening interests, she joined the Monash ALP executive during her final year of study at the suggestion of fellow student Bill Shorten, because, she later said, 'they needed a girl' (Barrett 2018, 36). She graduated (BA Hons, 1988) with a major in English literature, her honours thesis being on the novels of Anthony Trollope.

After graduation, Burke gained employment with the state government authority VicRoads, initially in the stressful field of compulsory land acquisitions, and later as an industrial relations officer. In 1993 she was employed by Victoria University

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 15: Anna Burke.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

in industrial relations, and the following year switched to the labour movement as national industrial officer with the Finance Sector Union. Her interest in industrial relations led her to postgraduate study at the University of Melbourne (MCom Hons, 1994). On 16 April 1994, she married Stephen Burgess, a hospital and healthcare professional who went on to teach at Monash University.

In 1996 Burke was invited by ALP party organisers to stand for preselection in the federal seat of Chisholm, which encompassed the area around her eastern-suburbs home. Despite losing—and finding the experience far from pleasant—she agreed when asked to nominate again in 1998. Few other candidates were attracted to what appeared to be a safe Liberal seat and Burke was selected. She was advised to ‘just run a good campaign’ (Hearn 2015) for the election held in October that year, and accept that she was merely filling in as the ALP candidate. But the sitting member, Liberal minister Michael Wooldridge, unexpectedly decided to switch to the seat of Casey, despite having won Chisholm at the past four elections. After a hard-fought campaign, Burke won Chisholm with a two-party preferred swing of more than 4 per cent. Despite her initial pessimism about her long-term prospects, she became a popular local member, and was returned at the next five elections.

Parliamentary life appealed to Burke; it was ‘weird, strange but exhilarating, exciting, rewarding and frustrating’ (Hearn 2015). She used it as a forum through which to draw attention to social issues, including eating disorders, anaphylaxis, human trafficking, climate change, and live animal exports. On issues such as her opposition to the offshore processing of asylum seekers, she was prepared to make her views known even when they conflicted with established ALP policy. She served on a number of parliamentary committees, including the Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services, and House Standing Committees on Economics, Finance and Public Administration; Climate Change, Environment and the Arts; and Petitions. She was deputy chair of the House Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration when it produced a report in 2003 on cost-shifting to local government. Although widely referred to as the ‘Hawker report’ after the committee’s chair, David Hawker (another future Speaker), Burke made a major contribution that, according to her friend the member for Ballarat, Catherine King, led to greater recognition of the role of deputy chairs of committees (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2008, 26). As chair of the House Standing Committee of Privileges and Members’ Interests, Burke presented, in November 2011, a discussion paper on a draft code of conduct for members of parliament.

Burke’s daughter was born in 1999, making Burke one of the few women, at the time, to have had a baby while serving as a member of parliament. She was back at sittings just a few weeks after giving birth. As there were then no childcare facilities in Parliament House, her husband took twelve months’ leave to care for the child and support Burke in her role as an MP. Their son was born in 2002. In 2005 Burke

attracted national attention by introducing into the House a private member's bill to regulate telemarketing calls, which helped lead to legislation establishing the Do Not Call Register.

Following Labor's victory at the 2007 federal election, Burke was elected Deputy Speaker under Speaker Harry Jenkins, on 12 February 2008. She was formally nominated by Catherine King, who, in so doing, described Burke as 'a south-eastern suburbs girl through and through' (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2008, 26). Burke was elected along party lines, 84 votes to 64, over the opposition's nominee, the member for Maranoa, Bruce Scott (VP 2008/9–10, 12.2.2008).

Quickly adapting to the role, Burke dealt calmly and patiently with unruly behaviour. Just ten days after her election, she was subjected to one of the most trying days ever faced by presiding officers in the Australian parliament. Earlier that day the Speaker had clashed with opposition members over a proposed motion that newly introduced Friday sittings of the House include a ninety-minute questions-without-notice session. This resulted in two Liberal members—one of whom was Tony Abbott—being ordered from the chamber. Burke was in the chair in this already febrile atmosphere when opposition members brought into the chamber a life-sized cardboard figure of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, which the member for Canning, Don Randall, proceeded to brandish in protest against Rudd's absence. The scene that followed amounted to a shouting match, as Burke demanded the removal of the offending item, which ended in her suspending the House for more than an hour. It resumed for just a couple of minutes, during which Jenkins, now back in the chair, spoke of how 'today's events have been of considerable concern' but added that he had 'full confidence in the work of all occupants of the chair today in what have been difficult circumstances' (H.R. Deb. 22.2.2008, 1284–85).

Following the August 2010 election, Burke did not recontest the Deputy Speakership. Instead, in an attempt to bolster its position on the floor, the now-minority Labor government nominated Peter Slipper, a dissident Liberal. In September 2010, Burke was appointed to the Speaker's panel. On 24 November 2011, Jenkins resigned as Speaker, and the government proceeded to propose that Slipper succeed him. The opposition protested by nominating Burke as Speaker; she immediately declined, only for a succession of eight other government members to be similarly fruitlessly nominated before Slipper was finally elected. Burke, however, was nominated by the government to return to the Deputy Speakership, which she won by 72 votes to 71—again over Scott (VP 2010–11/1144–45, 24.11.2011). The Slipper Speakership was at once highly controversial. From 8 May 2012, Burke took the chair after Slipper announced that he would stand down until allegations against him concerning misuse of Cabcharge vouchers and of sexual harassment had been resolved. The suspension

of Tony Abbott from the chamber on 20 August 2012 for failing to withdraw an unparliamentary remark without qualification was the first time an opposition leader had been ordered from the House since John Howard in 1986.

On 9 October 2012, Slipper resigned as Speaker and Burke was elected unopposed to replace him. She was only the second female Speaker after Joan Child, who called her to offer congratulations. Although well prepared to serve, Burke faced a difficult environment with a government lacking an assured majority and an aggressive opposition. Question time was routinely front-page news, yet the new Speaker remained highly regarded for her patient and impartial handling of her responsibilities. She did not attend party meetings and later outlined her approach to the Speakership:

You are there representing the institution. I'm a member of the Labor Party, but when you are in the chair it's about the orderly running of the institution and the Parliament. It's about respect for the rules. (Barrett 2018, 37)

The exigencies of a hung parliament resulted in Burke, with the support of Clerk of the House Bernard Wright, dealing with its unprecedented demands as they went. Yet, public perceptions to the contrary, the parliament worked well in passing more legislation than when the government had a secure majority. Burke looked back on this period as 'an amazing time' (H.R. Deb. 5.5.2016, 4517). The Speaker's international role led her to actively support 'twinning' relationships between Australian parliaments and those of Pacific nations, including the Parliamentary Pacific Women's Partnership, which sought to increase the numbers of women in parliaments. In March 2013, Burke declined to ban members from tweeting during question time on the basis that this would necessitate a blanket ban on electronic devices in the chamber, to which she suspected many members would object. Like many presiding officers before her, including the very first Speaker, Sir Frederick Holder, she confessed to finding it hard at times not to respond to opposition speeches.

Burke's Speakership was ended by Labor's defeat at the September 2013 election. Soon after, she was disappointed not to be appointed party chief whip, and attributed this failure to falling foul of a factional deal. In December 2015, she announced that she would retire at the next election, as she could no longer guarantee her total commitment. During her farewell speech, she said that her motto in politics was 'to be active and approachable', and quoted Trollope: 'It's dogged as does it' (H.R. Deb. 5.5.2016, 4512). Bill Shorten, now her party's leader, praised her as 'a skilful, impartial and patient Speaker', who presided over 'an often fractious and contested Parliament' (Shorten 2015).

In retirement, Burke was, in 2017, appointed a full-time member of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, hearing claims on matters ranging from Centrelink decisions and child support determinations, to family tax benefit cases and citizenship applications. She became chair of Allergy and Anaphylaxis Australia (2016–18), a director of the

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Institute of Breathing and Sleep (appointed 2016), and chair of the advisory council of the Monash University Accident Research Centre (appointed 2018). In 2017 she was awarded a Monash University Fellowship in recognition of distinguished public service. Two years later, she was appointed AO. Although she admitted to being 'a bit ambivalent' (Koziol 2019) about being so honoured, as a supporter of 'Honour a Woman', which sought to have more women nominated for honours, she felt she should not decline. Simultaneously, she publicly stated that her own faction of the ALP, the Victorian right, should do more to encourage women parliamentarians.

A portrait by Jude Rae is held by Parliament House. At its unveiling, Burke modestly described herself as being 'as artistic as a dead chook' (Wright 2017), but the portrait's bright colours and strong lines vividly capture her lively presence and her pride in having presided over what she thought of as 'a magnificent institution' (Australian Women Online 2013).

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