

Cameron, Archie Galbraith: Speaker 1950–1956

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Archie Galbraith Cameron (1895–1956), farmer and twelfth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 22 March 1895 at Happy Valley, South Australia, son of John Cameron, labourer, and his wife, Mary Ann, née McDonald. Educated at Nairne Public School until the age of twelve, Archie was employed to clear scrub before working on his father's farm near Loxton. He enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 17 April 1916, fought on the Western Front from January 1917, and rose to temporary regimental quartermaster sergeant. He briefly met Captain Earle Page at a casualty clearing station, whom he was later to succeed as leader of the federal Country Party. Arriving home in July 1919, he was discharged on 7 September.

That year Cameron took up land at Noora as a soldier-settler. He served on the Loxton District Council (1920–24, 1926–27), read widely in literature, economics, biography, and history, and learned to speak fluent German. Received into the Catholic Church from a strict Presbyterian background, he was to become close friends with Dr Matthew Beovich, the archbishop of Adelaide. On 15 April 1925 at St Joseph's Church, Brighton, Cameron married a twenty-two-year-old office worker, Margaret Eileen Walsh; they were to have a son and a daughter. In 1942 the family moved to a dairy farm near Oakbank in the Adelaide Hills.

Cameron unsuccessfully stood for the House of Assembly as a Country Party candidate for the multi-member electorate of Wooroora in 1924. During the campaign, he denounced the still new coalition between the federal Nationalist and Country parties as the unsavoury product of machine politics. He won the seat three years later and held it until 1934. As his party's parliamentary leader (1928–32), he played an important role in forming the South Australian Emergency Committee, which brought together the major local non-Labor groups from which the Liberal and Country League (LCL) emerged in 1932. The principal figure in the committee, (Sir) Archibald Grenfell Price, wrote that Cameron at this early stage of his public career had 'remarkable abilities and grave faults ... He was an excellent speaker, and most forceful, but he was unreliable ... I soon learnt to be careful with Cameron' (Kerr 1983, 94).

'ORDER, ORDER!'

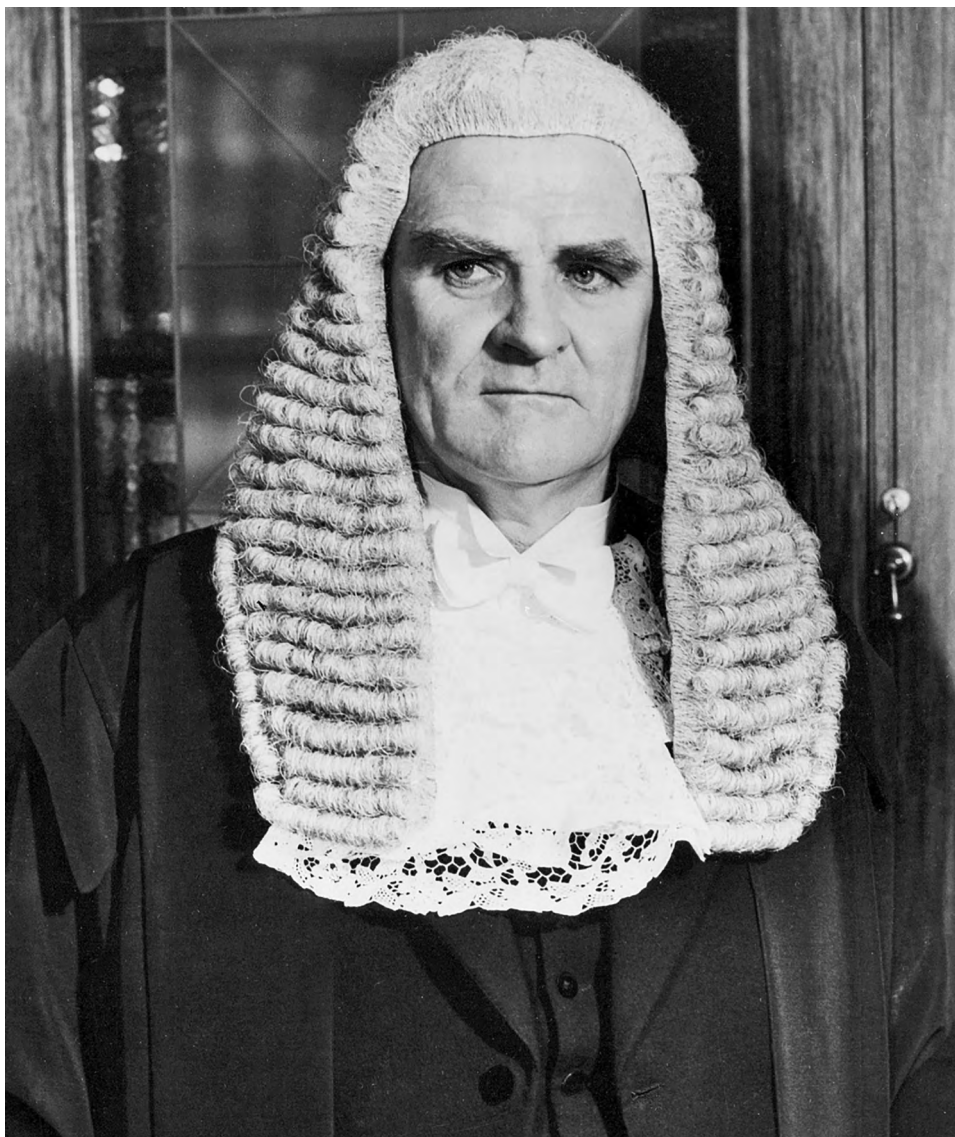


Figure 16: Archie Cameron.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

Under the terms of the amalgamation, Cameron was guaranteed endorsement by the LCL for a safe seat in the House of Representatives. In 1934 he was elected as the member for Barker, a seat in south-eastern South Australia that he was to retain until his death. He had persuaded his friend and old army comrade (Sir) Thomas Playford to contest Murray for the LCL at the 1933 state election. Cameron chose to sit as a representative of the Country Party, as he was entitled to do under LCL rules. He immediately attracted public attention by making an affirmation instead of swearing the oath of allegiance. Soon after, he attempted to have John Garden expelled from the House on the grounds of his previous communist affiliations. Cameron's talents were recognised by his appointment on 29 November 1937 as an assistant minister in Joseph Lyons's cabinet. While acting minister for commerce, on 15 June 1938 Cameron became the first minister to be named and suspended from federal parliament, arising from his calling the Victorian independent Alexander Wilson a 'clean-skin' (meaning 'unbranded') and refusing to withdraw the remark when called on by the Speaker, (Sir) George Bell (H.R. Deb. 15.6.1938, 2128–31).

On 7 November 1938, Cameron was promoted to postmaster-general. His conflict with the broadcasting industry culminated the following month when he temporarily revoked radio 2KY's licence because he objected to views expressed by one of the station's news commentators. He was alleged to have told the chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), William Cleary: 'Forget your charter, I don't believe in boards or commissions—I believe in ministerial control' (Dixon 1975, 133). (Sir) Robert Menzies's first ministry, installed in April 1939, consisted only of United Australia Party (UAP) members and so Cameron returned to the backbenches.

Following Page's retirement as party leader, a deeply divided Country Party met in Canberra on 13 September 1939 and unexpectedly elected Cameron as his successor. When the coalition was restored, he became minister for commerce, minister for the navy, and de facto deputy prime minister on 14 March 1940. His refusal to conform with agreed policy antagonised his Country Party colleagues. On 15 October, in circumstances as dramatic as those of his election, he lost the leadership during a tempestuous party meeting at Parliament House. He harangued his assembled colleagues and at one point stormed out into the lobby. Immediately after, he left both the party and the ministry. Throughout the rest of the decade, he sat with the UAP (from 1945, the Liberal Party), becoming a biting public critic of the Labor governments of John Curtin and Ben Chifley, and a somewhat more discreet judge of his party leader, Menzies. By 1943 Price thought Cameron had 'improved immensely', though 'all his old recklessness remained'. He also noted that Cameron 'was one of the few who could reduce Labor's Eddie Ward to impotence' (Kerr 1983, 172).

A temporary major since 1927 in the militia, Cameron was mobilised in November 1940 and was deployed to the Directorate of Military Intelligence at Army Headquarters, Melbourne. His uniform comprised a World War I Highland beret, World War II battledress, and the elastic-sided boots he habitually wore. He did not strictly separate his military and parliamentary roles and on at least one occasion attended the House in uniform. On 2 April 1941, he moved a motion of no confidence against the minister for the army, (Sir) Percy Spender, over his handling of the release of interned enemy aliens; this immediately lapsed for want of a seconder. Cameron added to his personal burden the management of the parliamentary affairs of A. M. Blain, the member for Northern Territory who was a prisoner of war. His relations with General Sir Thomas Blamey were punctuated by bitter disputes over the conduct of the war. On 5 May 1944, Cameron was transferred to the Reserve of Officers. After his death, it was disclosed by the wartime controller of the Allied Intelligence Bureau, Brigadier K. A. Wills, that the work Cameron had done on the Japanese order of battle had been of the 'greatest possible value' (*Advertiser* 1956, 2) to army intelligence. Characteristically, he had never talked about it.

With the return of the Liberal and Country parties to office in 1949, Menzies nominated Cameron as Speaker. The long-serving Clerk of the House, Frank Green, warned the prime minister that Cameron's habit of being 'so consistently wrong with such complete conviction that he was right' made him 'the worst possible choice' (Green 1969, 136). A former Speaker and keen observer of the office, Norman Makin, shared the widely held view that Cameron's appointment was 'a circumstance of political convenience' (Makin c. 1962) as his fiery independence as a minister or backbencher could easily destabilise the new government. On his election to the Speakership on 22 February 1950, he wore the traditional wig and robes of office eschewed by his Labor predecessor, John 'Sol' Rosevear. He objected to using Herbert Evatt's High Court of Australia wig, which had been presented to parliament, but as none other was available contented himself with reflecting that 'it was time some straight thinking was done under this wig' (Cox 1956).

Cameron's election as Speaker elicited disquiet from members of the House. Declaring that he would be 'as King Charles I found Montrose, a rather proud servant' (H.R. Deb. 22.2.1950, 18–19), he gave notice of what they could expect by likening his elevation to a Biblical parable in which the trees had sought one of their kind to rule over them, but after repeated refusals, finally accepted the bramble. Rosevear wryly welcomed his successor by commenting that Cameron had 'a great advantage over any other aspirant' for the Speakership as he doubted that 'any member of the Opposition in the last parliament raised so many points of order ... and was so consistently incorrect' (H.R. Deb. 22.2.1950, 20). The opposition leader, Ben Chifley, spoke of Cameron as a sinner turned saint, and pleaded that 'in dispensing justice even-handedly', he 'remember the saintly quality of mercy' (H.R. Deb. 22.2.1950, 20).

Green doubted the new Speaker's capacity to analyse problems of parliamentary procedure and soon found that he also declined to study the details of such issues as parliamentary privilege. Cameron cut a striking figure in the chair and courted controversy almost at once. In March 1950, his relations with the governor-general, the former Labor premier of New South Wales, (Sir) William McKell, were strained due to personal comments made by McKell ten years earlier, including what Cameron described as 'the most personal attack that I have ever been subjected to in my life' (H.R. Deb. 30.3.1950, 1415). The then New South Wales opposition leader had assailed Cameron as a hindrance to the war effort, using such labels as 'mistrusted', 'detested', 'blackmailing', and 'bushranging' (H.R. Deb. 30.3.1950, 1415). Cameron told the House that he had informed the governor-general 'that I had no desire to accept the hospitality of those who spoke of me in the terms employed by him', but also that he would 'treat His Excellency with the strict formality and respect due to his high office, and remove myself from his presence as soon as my duties had been discharged' (H.R. Deb. 30.3.1950, 1416). Chifley raised whether the Speaker was thereby contradicting his own ruling that a member 'may neither praise nor blame the Governor-General' (H.R. Deb. 30.3.1950, 1416), leading to an acrimonious debate and an unsuccessful censure motion.

Cameron developed the unpopular habit of summoning members to his rooms for questioning or admonition. In May 1950, he unavailingly summoned Labor's Gil Duthie for daring to question the Speaker's method of calling members at question time. For days afterwards, Cameron refused to give Duthie the call in the House, despite the opposition not proffering anyone else to ask questions, and appeals from Chifley, Evatt, and Rosevear. On 26 October that year, Cameron attended the opening of the rebuilt House of Commons chamber at Westminster.

Following speeches in the House closely, Cameron often called out transgressions such as referring to a parliamentarian by name or deviating from the subject under debate. His rulings included declaring discussion of the economic condition of communist China irrelevant to a debate on international affairs. During debate on the proposed referendum to give the Commonwealth government power to ban the Communist Party, he drew on a century-old House of Commons resolution to rule that Evatt, by now leader of the opposition, could not participate, as his service as counsel for the Waterside Workers' Federation gave him a pecuniary interest in proceedings. The House instead voted to suspend the relevant part of the standing orders, allowing Evatt to speak. On another occasion the same year, Cameron insisted that Labor's Eddie Ward stand when apologising to the chair and explain exactly why the apology was required. He was the first Speaker to use a microphone to monitor proceedings in the House, which was installed in the upholstery of the Speaker's chair.

The re-election of Cameron as Speaker on 12 June 1951 was heatedly contested, with the opposition unsuccessfully proposing Rosevear's reinstatement. Kim Beazley senior accused Cameron of using the Speakership 'to air public vendettas against highly placed persons, and private ones against Members of the Opposition' (H.R. Deb. 12.6.1951, 24). Labor members were particularly aggrieved by Cameron's use of the Speaker's reserve power under standing order 303 to remove a member from the chamber for 'grossly disorderly conduct' without a formal motion for suspension. Arthur Calwell opined that, although this power was intended to enable the removal of intoxicated members, Cameron applied it to anyone who dissatisfied him.

A firm moral guardian, Cameron imposed a rigid ban on betting in Parliament House and forbade card-playing or any other game of chance. He was alleged to have patrolled the press gallery to enforce this. His implementation of a 1950 decision by the Joint House Committee to abolish the shilling-per-square-foot rental levied on the press in Parliament House was motivated not by generosity but by his belief that it gave the press tenant rights when they should be there by the grace of the House alone. In 1951 he ordered the removal of a print of racehorse Phar Lap from the wall of the Parliament House barber's salon. The following year, the barber was abruptly given notice to quit the building, possibly as both Cameron and the President of the Senate, Edward Mattner, suspected him of being an SP bookie.

In 1953 Cameron returned to London as a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation to Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. True to his ancestry and surname, he held strong Jacobite views and invariably wore a tartan tie, yet still managed to charm the Queen Mother by telling her that 'when there is a Prince named Charles and a Princess named Anne a Cameron may visit Buckingham Palace in perfect safety' (Kerr 1983, 95).

As Speaker, Cameron zealously defended his authority over the management of Parliament House itself. When a government minister complained about his removal of titles from the doors of rooms occupied by parliamentary under-secretaries, he responded: 'I want to make it perfectly clear that this building is public property, and that the Speaker of the House of Representatives is the custodian—the only custodian—of that property' (H.R. Deb. 28.8.1952, 692). He also insisted that everyone should be properly dressed in the lobbies, but did not invariably apply his rules to himself. On a hot day, he frequently 'received visitors dressed only in shorts and a singlet' (Cox 1956), his bare feet on his desk. Cleaning staff were said to resent his weekend habit of walking around the lobbies so attired, fearing that visitors might mistake him for a cleaner and 'damage their prestige' (Cox 1956).

Cameron supported the May–June 1955 proceedings by the House against the Bankstown, Sydney, newspaper proprietor Raymond Fitzpatrick and journalist Frank Browne over a serious breach of parliamentary privilege, with the agreement of the government and much of the opposition. His bark at Browne to 'take your

hands off the bar' (H.R. Deb. 10.6.1955, 1625) when he appeared before the House fixed itself in the memories of those present. Even Menzies, no friend of either of the accused, thought this command 'harsh and unnecessary' (1967, 300). Cameron later ordered the destruction of the ABC tape recordings of proceedings. Yet he was by no means entirely a government partisan; foremostly, he sought to maintain the independence of the Speaker. He did not attend party meetings and the misgivings he aroused among government members resulted in five successful motions of dissent against his rulings, none of which led him to countenance resignation. One of the few occasions he acquiesced with either the government or the opposition was in June 1955 when, at the prime minister's request, he withdrew his approval for the reclassification of staff of the House of Representatives.

A sternness of character was matched by Cameron's striking countenance, embodied in a heavy brow, piercing blue eyes, and, in years prior to his Speakership, a curious 'cockatoo' peak of carefully upwardly brushed hair. Despite this exterior, he did not drink, smoke, or swear; his favourite adjective was 'thundering' (Ellis 1963, 251). Privately, he performed many personal kindnesses to members on both sides of politics. He took an interest in the welfare of ex-AIF members and was usually considerate of parliamentary cleaners, messengers, and gardeners. The exacting (Sir) Paul Hasluck chose him to comment on drafts of his official war history of the home front during World War II as, despite limited schooling, Cameron 'was widely read and more highly literate than most members of parliament' (Hasluck 1997, 29).

As a minister, Cameron was at times irascible, but he was also hardworking, determined, and a good administrator. In the chamber, he was a well-informed and fluent debater, always extremely forceful in expression. In once admitting to the House that he was 'conscious of my shortcomings', he more characteristically added that 'doubtless I shall proceed in the same old fashion' (H.R. Deb. 4.8.1954, 9). His tempestuous and at times eccentric nature made him one of the most colourful individualists in the parliament and the subject of stories for decades to come. Green summed him up as 'a queer mixture of generosity, prejudice and irresponsibility' (1969, 137).

An historian of the office of Speaker, Philip Laundy, asserted that 'no Speaker at Westminster could survive the kind of criticism which was levelled against Mr Cameron', which was perhaps a reflection of 'the robust temperament of ... a raw and unpolished democracy' (1964, 389). His contrariness has long obscured his principled assertion of the Speaker's independence and authority. Labor's Clyde Cameron said that his namesake's capacity to compel members to behave made Archie 'easily the best Speaker in living memory' (1990, 436)—a decidedly minority view among his party colleagues. Hasluck was uncharacteristically generous in agreeing, despite being conscious of Cameron's questionable rulings and authoritarian nature. A more typical assessment was Makin's view that 'temperamentally he was ill-fitted

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for the position' (c. 1962). The political scientist Finn Crisp agreed that Cameron was too combative to fully succeed as Speaker, despite his being a 'jealous but highly subjective guardian of Parliament's rights against the Executive' (1965, 246). But there was near unanimity that his integrity was never in doubt, including among his severest critics.

In August 1955, Cameron suffered attacks of influenza that affected his lungs and heart—both already weakened by gas in World War I. He died while still in office of a heart attack on 9 August 1956 in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney. Accorded a state funeral in Adelaide, he was buried in Mount Barker cemetery. His wife and son survived him. (Sir) Ivor Hele's portrait of Cameron was hung in Parliament House, a place that was more placid after his departure.

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