

# **Child, Gloria Joan: Speaker 1986–1989**

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Gloria Joan Liles Child (1921–2013), nineteenth and first female Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 3 August 1921 at Kew, Melbourne, youngest daughter of Warren Arthur Liles Olle, postmaster, and his wife, Hilda Cary, née Seedsman. Joan, her sister, Sarah, and brother, Warren, spent their childhood in Yackandandah and Beechworth in north-eastern Victoria before moving in 1932 to the Melbourne suburb of East St Kilda.

The leftist inclinations of her siblings and resistance to their father's strongly conservative convictions gave Joan her first exposure to politics. In Melbourne, she won a scholarship to attend Camberwell Girls Grammar School. There she did well academically but felt socially out of place, contributing to a lasting sense of life's unfairness and her readiness to stand up for what she saw as right. She left school at the age of fifteen and worked as a receptionist. On 18 February 1942, she married Harold Lindsey (Hal) Child, who was then serving in the army and later with the Royal Australian Air Force. After the war, they lived in Melbourne, where Hal worked as a salesman and four of their children—all boys—were born. They later moved near to Launceston, Tasmania, where Hal was state manager for Nylex and their last son was born. In Tasmania, Child became involved in campaigning for the Australian Labor Party (ALP), but did not take out membership. In 1963, after the family's return to Melbourne, Hal died of a heart attack.

Child had been working in advertising, but, as a widow with five children, the eldest aged seventeen, and being eligible for only a meagre pension, she was forced into a series of part-time jobs. Over the next four years, she cleaned houses, cooked in a nursing home, and worked in a knitwear factory. These experiences contributed to her commitment to social justice and the alleviation of poverty; bringing up her sons on her own also made her 'very decisive' (*Canberra Times* 1992). She sat on the committees of school parents' associations and other community groups and took a course in public speaking. In 1964 she joined the ALP and, after her youngest son

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 19: Joan Child.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6180, 16/9/87/3.

left school, became active in party affairs and in the Union of Australian Women. She faced barriers within the party based on her gender, especially to participating in policy discussions, but insisted on being heard.

In the run-up to the 1972 federal election, Child gained a place on the party's Federal Electoral Assembly for the seat of Henty in her home area of south-eastern Melbourne, but found that only men were considered appropriate candidates, some of whom she thought were totally unsuitable. This encouraged her to offer herself as a candidate. She secured preselection for Henty, aided, she felt, by the knowledge that the seat had never been won by Labor. Undeterred, she immersed herself in the life of the electorate. On election day, she secured a swing of 9.1 per cent, which brought her within a mere 308 votes of an upset victory over the sitting member, Max Fox, as Labor secured government nationally for the first time since 1949.

While she continued canvassing in Henty, Child worked as a liaison officer for Jim Cairns, minister for overseas trade, during which time she developed an interest in trade and industry issues. Meanwhile, the Labor government faced a hostile Senate that repeatedly blocked legislation, leading to a double-dissolution election in May 1974. Child sought to stand again only to find that, despite her near success two years earlier, she was expected to fight for party preselection against candidates drawn to what was now a winnable seat. This infuriated her, but she received decisive support from party official and Senate candidate John Button.

Campaigning hard on her foremost concerns of social justice and poverty, Child also focused on the contemporary issues of inflation, education, health care, and government spending. This time, her efforts were rewarded, as, despite a modest nationwide swing against the government, she defeated Fox by more than three thousand votes. When photographers came to her house to report on her win, she refused to adopt domestic poses of using a vacuum cleaner or putting out the washing, instead raising a glass of champagne to toast Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's re-election.

Her victory made Child not only the first Labor candidate to win Henty, but also the first woman Labor candidate to be elected to the House of Representatives and, at that time, the only female member of the House from any party. (There had been three previous non-Labor female members, one of whom, Doris Blackburn, was an independent Labor member). Few of her fellow members saw her arrival as groundbreaking. Mick Young was an exception and, in his first speech to the House, he described her election as a cause for rejoicing but also 'a source of shame' that it had taken so long for the ALP to produce a female member of the House (H.R. Deb. 16.7.1974, 234). Child's own first speech came straight after, in which she congratulated the Speaker, Jim Cope, for holding 'an onerous office, made more so at times than it need be by the behaviour that is sometimes as vociferous as it is unnecessary' (H.R. Deb. 16.7.1974, 238). Her main message concerned her favoured

theme of social justice, stating that Australia was a country in which no-one should live in poverty and where national wealth should be measured 'by the care and compassion it is prepared to extend to the old and lonely, the dependent, the disabled and the young who are in the schools' (H.R. Deb. 16.7.1974, 240).

Articulate and well informed about her electorate, Child was an impressive addition to the House. In her short first term, she spoke on social issues such as housing, health, schools, and the status of women. She drew on personal experience as a pensioner to illustrate the need for adequate support for poorer citizens. On occasion, she was caustic, such as when she accused Liberal member Don Chipp of consistently confusing the proposed Medibank with the British public health system (H.R. Deb. 7.8.1974, 106–7). She argued against foreign ownership of Australian resources and thought it absurd that there were only five women in the entire parliament, but also opposed setting gender quotas. The dismissal of the Whitlam government in November 1975 led to another double dissolution—this time, sweeping Labor from office. Child suffered a nearly 6 per cent swing against her and lost her hard-earned seat.

Temporarily out of elective office, Child worked part-time as an executive officer for the State College of Victoria Staff Association, and as an assistant to the Labor member Clyde Holding. She was unsuccessful when she stood for Henty again at the 1977 election but regained the seat in 1980 and so returned to parliament as a member of the opposition led by Bill Hayden. She was now one of three female members of the House and, at her behest, the Speaker, Sir Billy Snedden, agreed to henceforth refer to 'honourable Members' rather than 'honourable gentlemen'. In 1983 there was another double dissolution, at which Labor returned to government and Child retained her seat. On 28 February 1984, she was elected Chairman of Committees.

Child enjoyed her three years as Chairman of Committees but was disappointed not to be made a minister. When the Speakership fell vacant after Harry Jenkins senior resigned to become Australian ambassador to Spain, she put herself forward. On 11 January 1986, she won the Labor caucus ballot by a single vote when a deal between the left and centre-left factions fell apart. In the House, she defeated the opposition's nominee, Allan Rocher, to become Speaker, on 11 February 1986. In her acceptance speech, she responded to opposition calls for shorter ministerial replies to questions without notice by arguing that, as the remedy was not entirely in the Speaker's hands, they should seek to have the standing orders altered to impose a time limit on answers.

Child chose to eschew the robe and wig as symbols of office. Although she felt that 'Madam Speaker' was too formal a title, preferring to be addressed as 'Speaker Child', the former continued to be used widely. Recollection of the lack of guidance she had received in 1974 led her to introduce an orientation day for new members. She proved

calm and capable in the chair and was initially well respected by both sides of the chamber. Her naturally quiet and controlled voice, she felt, was more effective than a loud one. The traditional rowdiness in the chamber drew her disapproval and she had mixed success in maintaining order. This was especially so in the presence of Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Treasurer Paul Keating, who in full flight at question time were 'a difficult pair to handle' (Child 2015, 226). They repeatedly provided overly long answers, and could be obstinate when instructed to allow another member to speak. Child learnt to appreciate the value of inviting the minister for science, Barry Jones, to ask a question as a circuit-breaker as he invariably had something 'good and interesting and amusing to say' (Child 2015, 230).

In June 1986, Child led a parliamentary delegation to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Poland. Parliamentarians from other parties who were on the delegation were impressed by her performance in sometimes difficult circumstances. Senator Norm Sanders of the Australian Democrats declared that, on human rights issues, Child had showed host governments 'what a very tough and thoughtful Australian woman can do' (S. Deb. 25.11.1986, 25). Child herself recalled how, at the end of a one-sided meeting with the formidable former Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, she successfully insisted that he stay to hear her representations on behalf of Jewish constituents about emigration from the USSR.

Unimpressed by the habit of most members of different parties and even of rival factions within parties of not socialising with each other in the parliamentary dining room, Child ran get-togethers to try to counter this. She also took a strong interest in promotions of parliamentary staff, and said she wanted them to be based primarily on ability. Relations with the Clerk of the House, Alan Browning, were not always smooth, and she recalled 'the occasional robust discussion' (Child 2015, 265) over such matters as her agreeing with the President of the Senate, Douglas McClelland, that the House could use Senate space in the crowded parliament building for printers. She worked closely with her personal private secretaries in scrutinising the details of budget estimates and expenditure. Together with the President of the Senate, she formally sponsored the Parliamentary Privileges Bill. When it passed in May 1987, the Act clarified both houses' powers, privileges, and immunities—matters hitherto largely unresolved since Federation. Following the election of July 1987, she was re-elected Speaker on 14 September, winning against the opposition's nominee, Don Dobie.

The following year was dominated for Child by the move to the new parliament building. She became heavily involved in the final stages of fitting out the new parliament house, grappling with matters ranging from the design of courtyard gardens to carpet patterns, the safe depth of steps, natural lighting of offices, and the danger of falling into the water feature in the Members' Hall. A particularly contentious matter was the fate of the Speaker's chair presented by the British

parliament in 1926, which proved unduly difficult and too expensive to be moved to the new building. She found the chair custom built for the new House chamber more functional than visually impressive. As Speaker, she was very involved in the ceremonial opening by Queen Elizabeth II. Child had to insist to Prime Minister Hawke that he not escort the visiting Queen into the House of Representatives, as longstanding Westminster tradition held that the monarch must be invited by the representative of the members—namely, the Speaker herself.

In the new building, Child missed the conviviality that its cramped predecessor had forced on members. She suspected that this contributed to a decline in conduct, which was not helped by the much bigger chamber, making it harder for the Speaker to project her personal authority. But she accepted that there was no turning back from the new environment and explored the opportunities it provided for modest fundraising ventures such as by hiring out the Great Hall. In May 1988, she introduced a bill to reduce the number of parliamentary departments from five to three by creating a new Department of Parliamentary Services, only to have it rejected by the Senate.

Disliking the rowdiness of so much Australian parliamentary conduct, Child's health suffered under the strain. When dealing with questions on a proposed casino for Canberra, she admitted that she was not always familiar with the subject matter raised in parliamentary questions, making it hard for her to determine the relevance of answers and leading her to suggest that members see the relevant minister if not satisfied with what was provided in the House. A redistribution announced late in 1988 that foreshadowed the abolition of Henty made easier her decision in December 1988 to retire at the next election.

By this time, Child's relationship with the opposition had deteriorated despite good relations with some of its individuals. In March 1989, she faced a censure motion moved by opposition leader John Howard for failure to act impartially after she had named Ian Sinclair, a future Speaker, for disrespect to the chair by having interjected 'and you' after she had appealed to members to 'look at their behaviour' (H.R. Deb. 8.3.1989, 633). The motion was defeated along party lines, but not before a lengthy debate during which she was criticised by Howard and vigorously defended by Leader of the House Kim Beazley and Paul Keating. She caught a chronic virus during a 1989 trip to Turkey for Anzac Day and continued to suffer from the effects of a car accident the previous year. Increasingly, she felt she could no longer manage the administrative demands imposed on her. She resigned as Speaker on 28 August 1989, seven months before the 1990 election.

In retirement, Child reflected that the Speaker's chair can be 'the loneliest seat in the House' (2015, 232), and that 'when your team is losing the umpire often gets the blame' (Veitch 2013). She remained active in retirement, living alone but close to her family. A consultant on public and government relations, and a long-time patron

of the Epileptic Society, she still attended party meetings, enjoyed reading detective novels, and found that knitting helped her arthritis. In 1990 she was appointed AO and in 2001 was awarded the Centenary Medal.

Child died on 23 February 2013, survived by her five sons. At the time of her death, the House had its second female Speaker, Anna Burke, who was conscious of following in Child's 'wonderful footsteps' (H.R. Deb. 12.3.2013, 1613). Burke recalled that Child 'called me when I was elected Speaker and said hang tough' (Age 2013), adding that Child could be 'pretty fierce ... Joan was there in a pretty difficult stage—she had Paul Keating to contend with ... and she stood up to it' (Age 2013). Child was physically small and deceptively soft-spoken, but quickly became assertive when she felt she was being disregarded. Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted how well the photo of Child raising a glass to Gough Whitlam captured her boldness, defiance, and cheekiness (Gillard 2013). Barry Jones recalled that, although she faced difficulties in the 'gladiatorial' atmosphere of question time, he was impressed by her 'judgment, commitment and integrity' (Jones 2006, 248). On 5 March 2013, a state funeral was held at the Monash University Religious Centre. Her portrait by Charles Bush, which delighted the otherwise graciously modest Child, hangs in Parliament House.

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