

# Cope, James Francis (Jim): Speaker 1973–1975

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James Francis Cope (1907–1999), glassworker and fifteenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 26 November 1907 at Surry Hills, Sydney, youngest of five sons of Victorian-born George Eugene Cope, compositor, and his New South Wales-born wife, Martha, née Ellem. The family's support of the South Sydney District Rugby League Football Club, the 'Rabbitohs', imbued in Jim a lifelong enthusiasm for the sport, alongside cricket and billiards. His father was a strong supporter of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and his brother Reg, a close ally of (Sir) William McKell, would go on to serve with him in the party's Redfern branch, and on Redfern City Council. As the youngest child, Cope was particularly close to his mother, who helped develop his strong moral values.

Cope attended Crown Street Public School and, briefly, Bourke Street School, but economic hardship and his father's illness resulted in his leaving after two years of secondary studies. He became a messenger boy at Potter & Birks, a distributor of medical and chemical products. From 1924, he was a machinist at the Randwick tramway workshops, and played cricket at nearby Moore Park, where he once scored an unbeaten century against the spin bowling of the future Test player Bill O'Reilly. With the onset of the Depression, retrenchment left Cope unemployed for three years, during which, as a single man, he relied on five shillings a week relief support from the state government. On 19 November 1932, at St Michael's Anglican Church, Surry Hills, he married Myrtle Irene Hurst, a machinist from Mascot. Their daughter, Bonni, was born in 1934. The young couple received fourteen shillings and tuppence a week in relief support, six shillings of which went to pay rent. To avoid tram fares, Cope and one of his brothers frequently walked from Redfern to a panelbeaters' shop at Camperdown where they joined hundreds of others who formed up 'like a line of cattle' (Hamilton 19 December 1972) in the hope of being chosen for a day's paid work. He reluctantly gave up playing cricket to earn pay as an umpire. Using money from his mother, he purchased two billiard tables and opened a club in Darlinghurst. He subsequently sold the tables and became a billiard marker in central Sydney—essentially a paid players' assistant.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 21: Jim Cope.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1200, L83656.

The Depression fundamentally influenced Cope's political outlook. Despite fruit and vegetables not being covered by dole coupons, he discovered that unsold produce was routinely dumped off South Head and concluded that 'there was something terribly wrong with this sort of system' (Hamilton 26 December 1972). He rejected an offer to join the Communist Party on the grounds that 'I believe in democracy' (Cope 1983) and because he was more attracted to the social agenda of Premier Jack Lang. On 3 June 1930, he joined the Redfern branch of the ALP, and went on to become branch secretary. World War II, however, presented Cope with new opportunities. At the Amalgamated Wireless Valve factory at Ashfield, he became a skilled fabricator of glass tubes for the manufacture of radars, working under conditions of wartime secrecy. In 1947 he ran for Redfern City Council, only to be defeated by the Communist Party candidate. The following year, he won a by-election for the council, and also held several ALP organisational positions, including the presidency of the Federal Electorate Council and the branch chairmanship for the federal seat of Cook. He worked with a former colleague in a business supplying speciality glass for laboratories, and rose to become honorary federal treasurer of the Australian Glass Workers' Union (1952–55).

In 1955, following the death of the sitting member Tom Sheehan, Cope sought ALP preselection for Cook. Although a staunch anti-communist, he, as a supporter of the party's leader, Dr H. V. Evatt, had to defeat an alleged 'grouper' from the party's right wing, Kevin Dwyer, before winning the seat easily at a by-election in May. Cook was abolished soon after, but he nominated for and won Watson at the general election of December 1955. Watson took in much of the Alexandria, Botany, Mascot, Matraville, Redfern, Rosebery, and Waterloo region, a tough and demanding constituency that, as his home region, Cope was proud to represent. From the backbench, he delivered carefully prepared speeches, usually on social welfare issues, but he became better known for his timely witticisms. When Prime Minister (Sir) Robert Menzies claimed that a passing truck driver had shouted to him 'Good on yer, Bob', Cope at once responded: 'He should have been pinched for drunk driving' (Hamilton 19 December 1972). Even political opponents came to appreciate his interjections, with a later Liberal leader, (Sir) Billy Snedden, conceding that the affable Cope often 'restored the temper' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1973, 9) of the House during tense sittings. He also was an outspoken advocate of electoral reform, especially by seeking to have candidates' names listed randomly on ballot papers to deny those early in the alphabet the unfair advantage of the 'donkey vote'. Gough Whitlam later credited him with doing 'more than any other member' (Whitlam 1985, 660) to expose this flaw in electoral procedures.

Cope was one of the longest-serving members of the Public Accounts Committee (1956–72), and he also became Deputy Chairman of Committees (1967–72). In April 1968, he helped Whitlam defeat a challenge for the ALP leadership from Jim Cairns, but came to feel that his support was quickly forgotten. Cope looked

to becoming Speaker and made a close study of parliamentary procedures and the standing orders (Freudenberg 1977, 309). Following the 1969 federal election, at which Cope transferred to the seat of Sydney in the wake of the abolition of Watson, Labor members nominated him for the Speakership against the incumbent, (Sir) William Aston. The Labor frontbencher Clyde Cameron rhetorically compared 'the jovial dignity of Mr Cope with the cruel and arrogant posture' (H.R. Deb. 25.11.1969, 9) of Aston. Aston nonetheless won the ensuing secret ballot narrowly, 63 votes to 60 (VP 1969/6–7, 25.11.1969). When the ALP attained government in December 1972, Cope again made it known that he 'thought that I could do the job' of Speaker (Cope 1978). His eventual successor as Speaker, Gordon Scholes, recalled that Cope 'virtually had the job sewn up long before we got to the election' (Scholes 2010). He was unopposed in caucus and, on 27 February 1973, the first sitting day for the new government, the House unanimously elected him Speaker. Prime Minister Whitlam looked forward to 'good spirit and good humour' in the session to come, and Snedden urged Cope not to abandon his 'sense of fun' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1973, 8, 9).

In the chair, Cope presented very differently from his predecessor. He followed longstanding ALP tradition by not wearing the wig or gown, commenting that a wig's only use was that 'it hides the dandruff' (Hamilton 19 December 1972). His 'broad Australian accent' was said to differ from the more clipped tones of most previous Speakers (Murray 1975), and, under pressure, his voice took on a 'raucous shrillness' (Freudenberg 1977, 309). Some of his colleagues felt he was prone to 'warning members about their behaviour, and then not acting on those warnings' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1975, 6). He preferred his long-established habit of employing humour to defuse tension. His misfortune was to occupy the chair during a period of near constant parliamentary crisis. Unaccustomed to being in opposition, members of the coalition parties were frequently pugnacious in the House and used their numbers in the Senate to frustrate the government's ambitious legislative program. Cope suspended sixteen members during his tenure. He became convinced that the opposition, especially some Country Party members, was out to undermine his authority, but also that he was not receiving the full support of his party colleagues (Cope 1997, 202).

Circumstances notwithstanding, he and the Liberal President of the Senate, Sir Magnus Cormack, 'cooperated very, very well indeed' (Cope 1978) in the administration of parliament. True to his political values, Cope was 'appalled at the working conditions' (Cope 1978) of some parliamentary staff, especially those in the kitchens. He pursued equal pay for female employees and arranged the procurement of new kitchen equipment. Both he and Cormack were responsible for renovations that included introducing airconditioning into the members' and visitors' dining rooms.

His actions inside the chamber, however, earned him little favour from his fellow parliamentarians. On 5 April 1973, Cope named two members, including the former prime minister (Sir) John Gorton, for showing disrespect to the chair (H.R. Deb. 5.4.1973, 1125–26). The following month, after naming Liberal member William Wentworth for unparliamentary language, Cope was subject to a motion of no confidence from the opposition. Snedden now felt that Cope's use of humour had gone so far that he could 'have no confidence ... in a Speaker who seeks to be some sort of comedian' (H.R. Deb. 8.4.1974, 1118). He also accused Cope of using the chair to 'protect the Government', while the Country Party leader, Doug Anthony, charged him with 'vindictiveness' (H.R. Deb. 8.4.1974, 1119, 1121).

During the first twelve months of the twenty-eighth parliament, the Senate rejected nineteen pieces of major legislation, six of which provided grounds for a double dissolution. Controversy arose from the appointment of the Democratic Labor Party senator Vince Gair as ambassador to Ireland in a failed attempt to time his formal resignation to create an extra vacancy for an expected half-Senate election, giving the government a chance of winning an upper-house majority. Decrying this manoeuvre, the opposition blocked the government's supply bills, leading to a double-dissolution election on 18 May 1974 at which the government was re-elected but narrowly failed to secure a Senate majority. The aftermath posed several challenges for Cope. Amid growing dissatisfaction among caucus members, Scholes and Joe Berinson unsuccessfully challenged him for the Speakership (O'Leary 1975). When parliament returned on 9 July, the opposition nominated the Liberal Geoffrey Giles as Speaker, but Cope was re-elected along party lines, 63 votes to 57 (VP 1974/6, 9.7.1974). When the six double-dissolution trigger bills again fell short in the Senate, the government moved to resolve the deadlock by conducting a joint sitting of both houses of parliament. Just five days before the sitting, Cormack and Senator James Webster filed a writ in the High Court of Australia challenging its validity, arguing that a double dissolution and subsequent joint sitting could only be called on the basis of a single bill, not six. The High Court's decision found for the Speaker and the government.

On 6–7 August 1974, Cope presided over the parliament's first joint sitting. This was far from a mere extension of existing parliamentary practice. To work out the necessary procedures, he worked intensely for three weeks with a special committee that included the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Norman Parkes, and the Clerk of the Senate, J. R. Odgers. There was also the logistical difficulty of hosting all parliamentarians in the House of Representatives chamber at once, for which 'we had to have special platforms made so as to fit them all in' (Cope 1978). The sitting ran for eighteen and a half hours and was the first instance of the parliament being televised live to a national audience. Cope felt that this amounted to a successful

trial, but later became wary of televising parliament. Each bill was passed, although the Petroleum and Minerals Authority Bill was subsequently invalidated by the High Court.

Later in August, Wentworth moved a motion of dissent from the Speaker's ruling relating to the precedence to be accorded to a censure motion against the government; similar motions became common over the months that followed. By early 1975, Cope's standing among members, including Prime Minister Whitlam, had deteriorated to the point of creating a 'flash-point situation' (Freudenberg 1977, 309). Government members increasingly felt he was failing to keep the opposition in check; his sharp wit had noticeably dimmed. This situation came to a sudden head on 27 February, when the Liberal frontbencher Jim Forbes accused the minister for labour and immigration, Clyde Cameron, of telling a 'monstrous lie' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 824). At Cope's prompting, Forbes substituted 'monstrous untruth' and then simply 'untruth', but when Cameron rose to protest and the Speaker called him to order, Cameron responded loudly, evidently to the Speaker: 'Look, I don't give a damn what you say' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 824). Cope insisted that he apologise, but the prime minister interjected bluntly 'no' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 824). Cope named Cameron, but the leader of the House, Fred Daly, was prevented by Whitlam from moving for Cameron's suspension, whereupon the manager of opposition business, Ian Sinclair, did so. Most government members followed their prime minister's lead in voting against the motion. As the vote was being conducted, Whitlam approached Cope behind the Speaker's chair to warn him: 'If you lose this division, you should resign' (Hocking 2014, 215). Watching from the backbench, former prime minister (Sir) William McMahon thought Whitlam's manner to be 'offensive and threatening' to the Speaker (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 825). This was the only occasion on which the government had not supported the Speaker after a member had been named.

Quickly assessing his options while the vote was still being conducted, Cope decided that accepting the anticipated outcome as a decisive vote of no confidence in himself would minimise damage to the government. He resigned immediately after the result was declared, vacating the chair in favour of Deputy Speaker Scholes. The dignity and promptness of his announcement drew evidently sincere applause from opposition members, the press gallery, and, reportedly, a few government members. It was exactly two years since he had been appointed Speaker. In the aftermath, some speculated that Cameron's remark had been aimed at Forbes, but Cope was sure that it was directed at himself, and further recalled the Clerk of the House urging him not to resign. The longstanding chief *Hansard* reporter Bill Bridgman described Cope's resignation as having 'left perhaps the greatest impression' (Hodgkinson 1976) of all the many parliamentary events he had covered since 1935.

Having already decided to retire at the next election, Cope did not recontest Sydney at the unexpectedly early poll of December 1975. Although confessing to boredom in the years immediately following his retirement, he made good use of his well-known love of billiards by starring in a 1976 television advertisement for billiard tables. That same year, he was invited by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to sit on the Official Establishments Trust, which administered the official residences of the prime minister and the governor-general. He agreed, on the condition that 'it wasn't a political committee' (Cope 1978). The committee surveyed the working environments at these premises during 1977 and concluded that staff were subjected to 'appalling out-of-date and inadequate conditions' (Heyman 1977). In 1978, his republican views notwithstanding, he accepted appointment as a CMG for his services to parliament. After living for forty-seven years in Redfern, he and Myrtle moved to Sans Souci in Sydney's south.

In retirement, Cope remained active in the ALP, attending branch meetings and volunteering in elections through to the mid-1980s. Despite giving interviews in his retirement, he refused to write memoirs because he would have to 'criticise too many of my friends' (Cope 1983), but corresponded cordially with Cameron (Cope 1997, 211). In 1983 he was played by Les Foxcroft in *The Dismissal* television miniseries. Cope spent two full days on the set offering advice on parliamentary procedure. In his later years, he suffered increasingly from congestive cardiac failure, and in 1995 was incapacitated by a stroke. He died in Sydney on 3 February 1999. A short and hunched figure who seemed diminutive in the Speaker's chair, he found that his light-hearted demeanour was of limited help during the tempestuous Whitlam years. Cope's passion for wit, forged amid the hardships of working-class Sydney between the wars, was exceeded only by his commitment to egalitarian principles. A portrait of him by Judy Cassab hangs in Parliament House.

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