

Edwards, Ronald Frederick (Ron): Deputy Speaker 1989–1993

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Ronald Frederick Edwards, economist and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 2 July 1945 at West Midland, Perth, second of two children of Western Australian-born parents Norman Frederick Edwards, railway engine driver, and his wife, Daphne Hope. Ron attended Governor Stirling High School and the University of Western Australia (BEc, 1966). In 1966 he moved to Canberra to take up a position as an administrative trainee with the Public Service Board.

From 1967 to 1976, Edwards lived in Sydney, where he was a research officer in the Commonwealth Department of Labour (1967–70) and taught economics and industrial relations at Sydney Technical College (1970–73). In 1970 he joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP), becoming president of its Manly branch (1972–76) and a delegate to the Warringah Federal Electorate Council (1972–76). On 10 April 1970, he married Pam Fairley; they were to have two daughters and a son. He became head of the Division of Social Sciences in the New South Wales Department of Technical Education (1974–76) and commenced studies at the University of Sydney, graduating Master of Education (1983).

At the end of 1976, Edwards returned to Perth, taking with him an interest in rugby league acquired during his Sydney sojourn. He commenced as a lecturer in economics and industrial relations at Churchlands College of Advanced Education, which was incorporated into the Western Australian College of Advanced Education in 1982. Living at the suburb of Trigg, he was persuaded to stand at the 1983 federal election for the local seat of Stirling, which was then held by the Fraser government minister Ian Viner. He won the seat—the result of fourteen months of intense campaigning and the electoral swing that brought Labor to national office. His retention of this very marginal seat at the elections of 1984, 1987, and 1990 was largely due to his dedication as the local member, including—according to an admiring colleague from a landlocked electorate—having ‘pulled one of his constituents out of the surf when that person was in difficulties’ (H.R. Deb. 29.8.1989, 475).

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 23: Ron Edwards.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

As an academic teacher of economics, Edwards was a firm supporter of the Hawke government's economic and industrial relations reform agenda. His first speech to the House emphasised the responsibilities of members to 'try to react to, reflect, and to some extent convey the aspirations and wishes of the electors' (H.R. Deb. 12.5.1983, 524), particularly on problems of unemployment, education, and the economic 'national crisis we face' (523). He also stressed the importance of creating educational opportunities for young people, especially through technical and further education, for which he recalled that the New South Wales system set an example 'for which there is a lot to be said' (H.R. Deb. 12.5.1983, 525). Although he was interested in the then still emerging issues of the environment, urban renewal, gender, and Indigenous rights, the priority he accorded to economic reform placed him in Labor's right-wing faction—a shift from his days in New South Wales politics.

With his expertise in economics, Edwards in 1988 became chair of Labor's powerful caucus economic committee, where he exchanged ideas with Treasurer Paul Keating and Finance Minister Peter Walsh. He also chaired the Joint Select Committee on Corporations Legislation (1988–89), which was largely concerned with controversial issues of business takeovers and safeguards for competition. The committee's deliberations contributed to the eventual establishment of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in 1995. Four opposition members presented a dissenting report from the main findings, but still noted 'the very courteous, even handed and effective manner' in which Edwards had 'conducted the business of the Committee at all times' (Joint Select Committee on Corporations Legislation 1989, 195). Other significant roles included membership of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Conservation (1983–87), the Standing Committee on the Environment, Recreation, and the Arts (1987–93), the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence (1983–84), and the Joint Statutory Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings (1983–93), which was instrumental in the introduction of televised sessions of parliament.

Edwards served as Deputy Chairman of Committees from September 1987 to August 1989. When Joan Child resigned as Speaker in August 1989, caucus elected her deputy, Leo McLeay, to be the government's nominee to succeed her; Edwards, also supported by the ALP's right-wing faction, received more caucus votes to become nominee for Chairman of Committees than McLeay did for the Speakership. Edwards was elected Chairman of Committees by the House shortly after (VP 1987–88–89/1418, 29.8.1989). One of his predecessors in the position, Clarrie Millar, in wishing him well, harked back to his own experience of sitting in the chair by observing that 'it is not always hot, but when hot it is exceedingly hot, and it is always lonely' (H.R. Deb. 29.8.1989, 480).

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As Chairman, Edwards gave priority to encouraging reasoned debate, but he was prepared to discipline unruly members, being responsible for five namings (with subsequent suspensions). He was given responsibility by Prime Minister Bob Hawke to organise the special joint sitting of parliament that was addressed by United States president George H. W. Bush on 5 December 1991. On 3 November the next year, the formal title of his position was changed to Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Committees.

Edwards retained Stirling by just 234 votes at the 1990 election. As the 1993 election approached, the *Canberra Times* reported that his 'skilful handling of rowdy MPs has been noted by both sides of the chamber' and had led to his being 'best known in Canberra for his deft role in the Speaker's chair' (Peake 1993). But at the election, his seat was one of two in Western Australia to fall to the Liberal Party, contrary to a broader national swing in favour of the government. His colleagues and the press commented that had he been re-elected he could well have had a choice between succeeding McLeay as Speaker or promotion to the ministry. Despite his commitment to Stirling, he was relieved that defeat signalled the end of shuttling between Canberra and Perth, and more time with his wife and family. After nearly ten years as a member and three and a half as Deputy Speaker, he was only forty-seven years old when he left parliament.

Although Edwards as a parliamentarian had been a committed Labor member, his gregarious personality had helped him sustain friendships across partisan boundaries. This and his unfulfilled ministerial potential were also reflected in the breadth of his post-parliamentary career. He enjoyed a short term as a talkback radio host on Perth station 6PR. As one of his passions has been to promote educational opportunities for Indigenous children in Western Australia, in 1995 he helped establish the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation, under the patronage of that famed Australian Rules footballer. Another educational interest for Edwards was his membership of the Anglican Schools Commission of Western Australia (1994–2017).

In 2006 Edwards gained a doctorate from the University of Western Australia for a thesis examining education and social inclusion. He served as a director of the Perth Mint (2005–15) and of the Potato Marketing Corporation (2013–17), and was a member of the National Landcare advisory committee (2014–17) and the Not-for-Profit Sector Reform Council. He became closely involved with the Western Australian fishing industry through membership of the Pacific Area working group for the Marine Stewardship Council and of the Seafood Trade and Market Access Forum, and as chair of the board of the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council. In 2017 he became chair of the State Emergency Management Committee and chaired the stakeholder reference group overseeing the monitoring of Murujuga rock art on the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara region. He has continued to contribute submissions to economic inquiries.

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