

# **Halverson, Robert George (Bob): Speaker 1996–1998**

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Robert George Halverson (1937–2016), air force officer and twenty-second Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born at Springvale, Victoria, on 22 October 1937, eldest child of Herbert Martinius Halverson, electrician, and his wife, Elizabeth Gretta, née Ordner. Herbert took a job at the William Angliss meatworks at Footscray in Melbourne's inner west. Bob went to the Geelong Road Primary School (now Footscray Primary) and later Footscray Technical College. There he became a cadet in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Air Training Corps—his first step towards fulfilling his ambition to become a pilot. He was close to his paternal grandfather, Bendik, who lived with the family—a Norwegian-born sailor who had arrived in Australia in the 1870s. His grandfather regaled young Bob with tales of his sailing days and instilled in him a desire to see the world.

Halverson's first chance to do so came early. He left school at the end of 1953 to begin an apprenticeship as an industrial chemist, but he remained active in the Air Training Corps with the aim of joining the RAAF. A bright young man, he was one of four RAAF cadets chosen in June 1954 to visit Britain at the invitation of the Royal Air Force (RAF), where he met Winston Churchill. The same year, he met Margaret (Maggie) Joan Charlton, a country girl undertaking pre-nursing training at the Footscray Creche and Kindergarten in Albert Street opposite the Halversons' home. She was warmly welcomed by the Halverson household. In 1956, after six months of national service, he joined the RAAF. The following year, he was one of four airmen selected to attend the army's Officer Cadet School at Portsea, Victoria, where he topped the course.

During his first posting to the RAAF base in Townsville, an explosion left Halverson deaf in one ear and ended his ambitions to fly. Transferred back to Melbourne to work in supply and equipment, he and Maggie married at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Box Hill, on 12 July 1958. Both tall, they were a striking couple. They had four children in quick succession as they moved between postings across Australia. In 1966 the family went to Washington, DC, where Halverson was a member of the

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**Figure 29: Bob Halverson.**

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

team buying F-111 aircraft for the RAAF, returning to Australia in 1969. In 1976, now a wing commander, he was posted for three years to the RAF base at Brampton, England, to assist with the restructuring of training facilities. He was also involved in organising Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee celebrations in 1977, for which he was awarded an OBE the following year.

When his RAF posting finished, Halverson decided to leave the air force, retiring as a group captain in 1981. He had long been interested in the stock market and began working for Vernon Hauser as a stockbroker and financial planner at Robertson and Thompson, part of the Bell Potter group. Hauser, a member of the Victorian Legislative Council, encouraged him to join the Liberal Party and to stand for state parliament. Halverson was drawn to the Liberals as he saw the Australian Labor Party (ALP) as too wedded to regulation and high taxes—'the grey face of socialism' (*Australian* 1984, 4)—a position that even in the early 1980s elicited some press comment as being seemingly unusual for someone with a working-class background. He was less attracted to state politics as he was more interested in national issues. His involvement with the Liberal Party deepened and he was a delegate to its state council in 1983–84.

At the December 1984 federal election, Halverson contested the seat of Casey for the Liberal Party. This sprawling seat had been created in 1969 to cover Melbourne's urban expansion eastwards into the Dandenong Ranges and towards the Yarra Valley. It had returned both ALP and Liberal members and, in 1983, had been won by Labor's Peter Steedman by a narrow margin that became even tighter after a redistribution of electoral boundaries. Amid an unexpected national swing against the Hawke government, Halverson won Casey 50.6 per cent to 49.4 per cent on a two-party-preferred basis. Reflecting on his win, he assured the press that it was nonsense to assume that all Liberals were silvertails (*Australian* 1984, 4).

With his defence background, Halverson in parliament presented himself as a patriotic nationalist. He strongly supported Australia remaining a constitutional monarchy and retaining its existing flag against suggestions that both were inappropriate for modern Australia; he was to later revise his position on both issues. From the backbench, he undertook extensive committee work, including with the Joint Statutory Committee on Public Works and the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, where he drew on his overseas experience with the RAAF. He enjoyed committee work and believed there was scope for its extension. At the July 1987 election, his hard work, gregarious nature, and organisational ability helped to strengthen his position in what was Victoria's most marginal seat and he won 51.2 per cent of the two-party-preferred vote. His political career began to show promise. He acted as opposition shadow minister for foreign affairs and, in April 1990, after increasing his two-party-preferred vote in Casey to 58.2 per cent at the election the previous month, he became opposition whip.

These were difficult years for the Liberal Party, with a succession of parliamentary leaders failing to shake Labor's hold on government. Halverson supported John Howard in party leadership ballots, including that of April 1993 against John Hewson when Howard was defeated. In the reshuffle of opposition positions that followed, Halverson was dropped as whip. When Alexander Downer replaced Hewson as opposition leader in May 1994, Halverson was reappointed whip and a few days later promoted to chief opposition whip. He held the position until the coalition victory at the 1996 election, by which time Howard was leading the Liberals.

Halverson stood for the Liberal party room's ballot for Speaker amid a crowded field of four fellow Liberals and the National Party's Ian Sinclair. Sinclair had the support of the new prime minister and was a seasoned parliamentarian, but he faced the difficulty that the choice was to be made by Liberal members. Although Halverson was markedly less experienced, he was widely liked by his colleagues and seen as having been an effective whip, and he promised that he would be an independent Speaker 'as far as that can be achieved' (Grattan 1996, 11). He undertook not to attend party meetings, to resign from the party's federal strategy committee, and to not attend its state policy assembly. The party room voted overwhelmingly for him and he became Speaker on 30 April 1996, unopposed in the House. During the 1996 election campaign, Howard had promised that if elected he would raise the standards of parliamentary behaviour from the levels they had fallen to under Paul Keating. Halverson particularly supported the reform of question time, which, in his view, was frequently 'a farce' (Halverson 1989).

Once in the Speaker's chair, Halverson took Howard at his word but soon found that the new prime minister's views had changed. He followed Liberal precedent by wearing the traditional court dress of gown and jabot, but was the first non-Labor Speaker not to don the traditional wig. His imposing physical presence and loud voice seemed to suit the role. Controversially, he proceeded to allow supplementary questions in question time, which, although provided for in the standing orders, were subject to a longstanding convention that they were not to be accepted. On 28 May 1996, he allowed opposition leader Kim Beazley a follow-up question concerning the construction of a second Sydney airport to the minister for transport and regional development, John Sharp. The leader of the House, Peter Reith, immediately and unsuccessfully raised a point of order, referencing convention. In December that year, Reith refused to withdraw a derogatory remark about the opposition and was supported by Howard. Halverson was saved from public humiliation when Beazley withdrew the opposition's objection to Reith's comment. His continued defiance of convention by allowing further supplementary questions prompted repeated points of order from Reith and angered the government. Halverson later reflected that he had been naïve to expect the Liberal Party's leadership to support a more independent Speaker.

In May 1997, Halverson advised the House that, as he expected 'questions to be specific, and answers to be relevant' (H.R. Deb. 26.5.1997, 3929), he would intervene whenever ministers' replies became unnecessarily long or digressive. He also complained more broadly that the House was 'too often far too noisy' (H.R. Deb. 26.5.1997, 3930). He seemed to lack the standing in the party and the parliament that would have helped him enforce such good intentions, particularly when ministers ignored him, prompting opposition accusations of bias. Despite his personal popularity, he was not at heart a party warrior and had been better known for organising billiards competitions across party lines. By the end of 1997, after months of friction with Howard, Halverson had had enough.

Returning to parliament following the summer break, Halverson announced his resignation as Speaker to the House on 3 March 1998. 'This is not a decision I have taken lightly', he said, 'but it is my decision and mine alone and I am entirely comfortable with it' (H.R. Deb. 3.3.1998, 159). He later told colleagues that he did not want to experience another session like the last. Beazley expressed appreciation of Halverson's attempts 'to impose disciplines which, if actually adhered to, would have produced a situation in which, both in question time and more generally in the conduct of the House, that improvement of standards which the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) sought, but which has scarcely been delivered upon, might well have proceeded' (H.R. Deb. 3.3.1998, 159). Sinclair was elected Speaker the following day. Halverson later commented that he believed Howard was about to replace him as Speaker, leading to his decision to resign on his own terms.

Halverson returned to the backbench and, in August 1998, the minister for foreign affairs, Alexander Downer, announced his appointment as ambassador to Ireland and the Holy See. He was the first non-Catholic to hold these positions. His sociability, along with his wife's charm and organisational skills, made them popular hosts at the official residence at Killiney. Both were generous supporters of the expatriate community and of Irish charities with Australian connections. Halverson became close to then Irish president, Mary McAleese, and had a good relationship with Pope John Paul II. In 2001 he was made a papal knight and was awarded a Centenary Medal.

While in Ireland, Halverson began treatment for prostate cancer. In 2003 he and Maggie returned to Australia and bought a small beef cattle farm near Holbrook in southern New South Wales. Three years later, he was appointed a non-executive director of the Western Australian technology company QR Sciences. Survived by his wife, one daughter and three sons, he died at the farm on 9 February 2016, Maggie nursing him in his final illness. Halverson was cremated at Albury, New South Wales. A portrait by Robert Hannaford is in the Parliament House collection.

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