

Hawker, David Peter: Speaker 2004–2007

Clare Parker

David Peter Maxwell Hawker, grazier and twenty-fifth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 1 May 1949 in Adelaide, son of David Hawker, grazier, and his wife, Pamela Gavin, both South Australian born. The Hawkers were a prominent family whose ancestors migrated to South Australia in 1839 and included George Charles Hawker (1818–95), who established a merino wool stud north of Adelaide and served as Speaker of the South Australian House of Assembly (1860–65). George Hawker's grandson Charles Allan Hawker (1894–1938) represented the South Australian federal electorate of Wakefield for the Nationalist and United Australia parties (1929–38). David junior's father and uncle both served on local councils.

When he was four years old, Hawker's family moved to Apsley in western Victoria, where his parents ran a property focused on wool production. After attending Geelong Church of England Grammar School, he studied mechanical engineering at the University of Melbourne (BEng, 1972). He gained work experience at a petroleum refinery at Altona in Melbourne's west, and as a jackaroo on a family property west of Port Augusta, South Australia, before returning to manage the property at Apsley. In 1973 he married Penelope Ann Ahern of Melbourne. Penny and he had three sons and one daughter. Hawker was 'furious' with the Labor government of Gough Whitlam, particularly regarding economic management and Whitlam's comment that farmers had 'never had it so good' (*The House Magazine* 1987, 3). He joined the Liberal Party in 1973. In 1974 he became president of his local Apsley–Langkoop branch, and held the position until his election to parliament.

In May 1983, Hawker stood for federal parliament at a by-election for his local south-western Victorian seat of Wannon, following the resignation of its sitting member Malcolm Fraser, who had lost the prime ministership two months earlier. Hawker defeated eighteen candidates for preselection for the safe Liberal seat, including the former Victorian state minister Ian Smith. He won the by-election with a two-party

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Figure 31: David Hawker.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

preferred margin of more than 20 per cent, and held Wannon comfortably at the next nine elections. As a local member, he focused on such issues as fuel and freight costs, export prices, and wheat marketing. At the end of his career, he estimated that, as the local member, he had driven more than a million kilometres around Wannon.

Hawker served as opposition deputy whip (1989–90, and again briefly in 1994), before becoming chief opposition whip (1994–96), encompassing an uneasy period when leadership tensions threatened party cohesion. His service on the front bench was limited to three years as shadow minister for land transport (1990–93). Committee work dominated his second decade in parliament, when he sat on both party and parliamentary committees. From 1993 to 1996, he was a member of the Coalition's Expenditure Review Committee, and in 1993 was also appointed chair of the Liberal federal Regional and Rural Committee. His service on major parliamentary committees included the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (1993–96, 1998–2004). As chair of the Defence Subcommittee, he initiated what became the Australian Defence Force Parliamentary Program, which provides parliamentarians with practical experience of the Australian Defence Force. He was an 'urbane but firm' (*Canberra Times* 2004, 2) chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration (1998–2004), during which it produced a report on cost-shifting to local government (2003). Membership of the Speaker's panel (1998–2004) gave him valuable experience.

Overlooked for the ministry, Hawker became increasingly interested in the Speakership, having reasoned that 'I'd better find something else to keep myself busy' (Hawker 2011–13). He contested the position in party room votes in 1998 and 2002, but lost on both occasions to South Australia's Neil Andrew. Hawker campaigned on a platform of improving public faith in parliament, arguing that television broadcasting of question time 'does not always instil in people an appropriate level of confidence in our Federal Parliament' (McBride 2002). His persistence finally bore fruit after Andrew's retirement at the election of October 2004. He defeated Bronwyn Bishop in the final vote in the party room with the decisive support of his fellow Victorian members. He told the House that he hoped to emulate George Charles Hawker as a 'courteous and fair' Speaker (H.R. Deb. 16.11.2004, 11).

After twenty-one years in parliament and experience as whip, committee chair, and on the Speaker's panel, Hawker was well qualified. Yet his elevation was greeted with widespread surprise by the press, despite his past attempts to become Speaker. One newspaper opined that, faced with a difficult House, his 'previous experience in the farmyard should come in handy' (*Australian* 2004, 14). The new Speaker himself suggested that his time as a jackaroo was helpful, as it had taught him the importance of being resolute; 'if you show any fear, cattle will just walk over you. Wild dogs will attack you. You've got to be able to control that emotion' (Hudson 2004).

He likened the role of Speaker to that of a football umpire, 'where your job is to try and keep the game flowing smoothly' and 'people shouldn't really notice you're there' (Hudson 2004). The House of Commons practice of a fully independent Speaker was not, he thought, suited to the smaller Australian House of Representatives, where 'governments need every seat they have' (Milne 2004). He agreed with Neil Andrew that it would also not be viable for the Speakership to be held by someone from outside the governing party or outside parliament entirely. Understanding of 'the nuances of the Parliament' and its personalities could only be gained by long experience as a member; 'You had to read the mood' (Hawker 2011–13), and so he sometimes let matters resolve themselves.

Hawker's first few weeks as Speaker were a truly testing time. In his first question time, he ruled a question from opposition leader Mark Latham to John Anderson out of order on the grounds that a question to a minister about his role as party leader did not fall 'within the minister's administration' (H.R. Deb. 17.11.2004, 80). When the opposition objected, he determined that his ruling was consistent with the 'greater weight' of established practice, despite rulings by some earlier Speakers to the contrary (H.R. Deb. 18.11.2004, 1). The following month, the opposition unsuccessfully moved a dissent motion against his allowance of a question from a coalition backbencher relating to a bill on school funding due to be debated later that day (VP 2004/63–64, 1.12.2004). He ruled that, while the bill itself could not be the subject of a question, the general subject that it concerned could be. Labor was unhappy with both this fine distinction and the tabling of a document during the minister's reply, leading the manager of opposition business, Julia Gillard, to accuse Hawker of lacking impartiality. Several days later, he again faced an unsuccessful dissent motion when the opposition disputed his ruling against a question to the minister for veterans' affairs, De-Anne Kelly, on a decision she had made in her previous capacity as a parliamentary secretary (VP 2004/95–96, 7.12.2004).

These and other challenges to Hawker led one journalist to liken proceedings in the chamber to 'an aggressive press conference', adding that 'while it is not uncommon for new speakers to get a torrid first few weeks, it's been a long time since anyone has had such a horror start as Hawker' (Seccombe 2004). Parliamentary arithmetic may have been a factor. Following the 2004 election, the coalition government was in the unusual position of having a majority in both houses of parliament, making the opposition more than usually determined to scrutinise the government by whatever means available. This was particularly evident during debates on legislation for the government's controversial new industrial relations policy, WorkChoices. Hawker denied that as Speaker he favoured the government, arguing that 'it's my job to uphold order. I call it as I see it' (Burke 2005).

Ejections of Labor members and accusations of bias against Hawker continued during 2006, leading to 'stunts, chaotic noise and mass warnings and expulsions' (*Daily Telegraph* 2006). One incident stood out; in May 2006, he ejected Gillard from the House for calling Tony Abbott a 'snivelling grub' (H.R. Deb. 31.5.2006, 1) and refusing to withdraw unreservedly. Several days earlier, Abbott had himself used this phrase, but subsequently made a full withdrawal. Despite such incidents, among Hawker's ongoing concerns as Speaker was how to broaden public appreciation of parliament beyond unrepresentative news clips. Few realised that government and opposition members worked together much of the time, passing most legislation unopposed and cooperating in the work of parliamentary committees.

As a presiding officer, Hawker was jointly responsible for overseeing management of the parliament building. A parliamentary childcare facility was finally approved in August 2007 after many years of demand for this service. Vehicle access to Parliament House was restricted by use of retractable bollards after a review suggested that car bombs were the biggest risk to the building; mail was more thoroughly screened following several white powder scares. But he and the President of the Senate, Paul Calvert, rejected a proposal for police background checks of parliamentary staff and journalists.

After the coalition lost government at the 2007 election, Hawker decided to repay the faith of his electors in Wannon by serving a full term as their member. He returned to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2008–10), but in May 2009 announced his intention to retire at the 2010 election. Being out of government had proved frustrating, especially after having been in opposition for more than a decade earlier in his long parliamentary career. In 2010 he proposed, with the support of Deputy Speaker Anna Burke, that the funding of the parliament be independently determined. He argued that, as the budget to run parliament had been cut while ministerial staff and departmental budgets had grown, 'the balance between parliament and the cabinet ... is tilting unhealthily towards the cabinet of the day' (H.R. Deb. 16.6.2010, 5592). Hawker felt that the only way to correct this was 'a parliamentary commission that adequately resources the parliament' (Hawker 2010). The House Standing Committee on Appropriations and Administration, which considers estimates of annual funding for the Department of the House of Representatives, was established during the parliament that followed his retirement.

When Hawker left parliament in August 2010, his predecessor in Wannon, Malcolm Fraser, described him as a distinguished 'quiet achiever' (Johnson 2009). Hawker returned to the family property, where he worked alongside two of his sons. He took on a range of other positions, including as chairman of the committee of governors for the ecologically significant Heart Morass wetlands in Gippsland, chair of VicRoads' Motorcycle Expert Advisory Panel, membership of the board of Abbeyfield Australia, an organisation dedicated to community-based housing, and membership

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of the fundraising committee for the Warrnambool Base Hospital. He was appointed AO in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2012 for 'distinguished service to the Parliament of Australia, to public administration and monetary policy reform, and to the community through local government, health and sporting organisations'. A portrait by Jiawei Shen was unveiled in September 2008 at Parliament House, depicting him in the Speaker's robes and posed proudly before the mace.

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