

Mackay, George Hugh: Speaker 1932–1934

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George Hugh Alexander Mackay (1872–1961), businessman and eighth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 20 March 1872 at Copperfield in central Queensland. His parents, Jane Mackay, née Baird, and her husband, Hugh Mackay, a carpenter, were Scottish immigrants who had arrived in Brisbane together in December 1868. Hugh died suddenly of heart disease on 5 June 1872, leaving his wife with a daughter born in 1870 and baby George. Brought up by his mother, Mackay remained close to her throughout her life.

Mackay attended public schools at Clermont and Bundaberg but, as an avid reader and aspiring writer, largely educated himself. In 1887, after a brief apprenticeship as a pharmacist, he began a printer's apprenticeship at the *Peak Downs Telegram* at Clermont, becoming foreman printer in 1894. He also wrote for the publication and was appointed its managing editor in 1896. On 23 September 1896, he married Edith Ann Heard at Clermont Wesleyan Church. Three children were born at Clermont, but only the youngest, George Baird Mackay, survived. In 1897 the *Telegram* lost a libel case over a story Mackay had written accusing the manager of Gordon Downs station of cancelling the agreements of the station's rouseabouts. Despite receiving public sympathy for his stance, he resigned and joined his widowed sister, Barbara, in managing a bookshop at Clermont. Freed from his newspaper role, he was elected to Clermont Town Council in 1899 and served as mayor (1900–02). He was also involved in many local causes, including the Oddfellows Lodge, the hospital committee, and the rifle club.

In June 1902, following a disagreement with his sister, Mackay sold his share of the business and moved to Lismore in northern New South Wales. There he bought a newsagency, the Lismore Book Arcade, where he worked for a year before leasing a small dairy farm at nearby McLean's Ridges to gain practical experience of the land. He was again secretary of the local rifle club and, at McLean's Ridges, became president of the school of arts. Enthusiastic about the developing dairy industry, he joined a group of Richmond River farmers who together moved to Queensland

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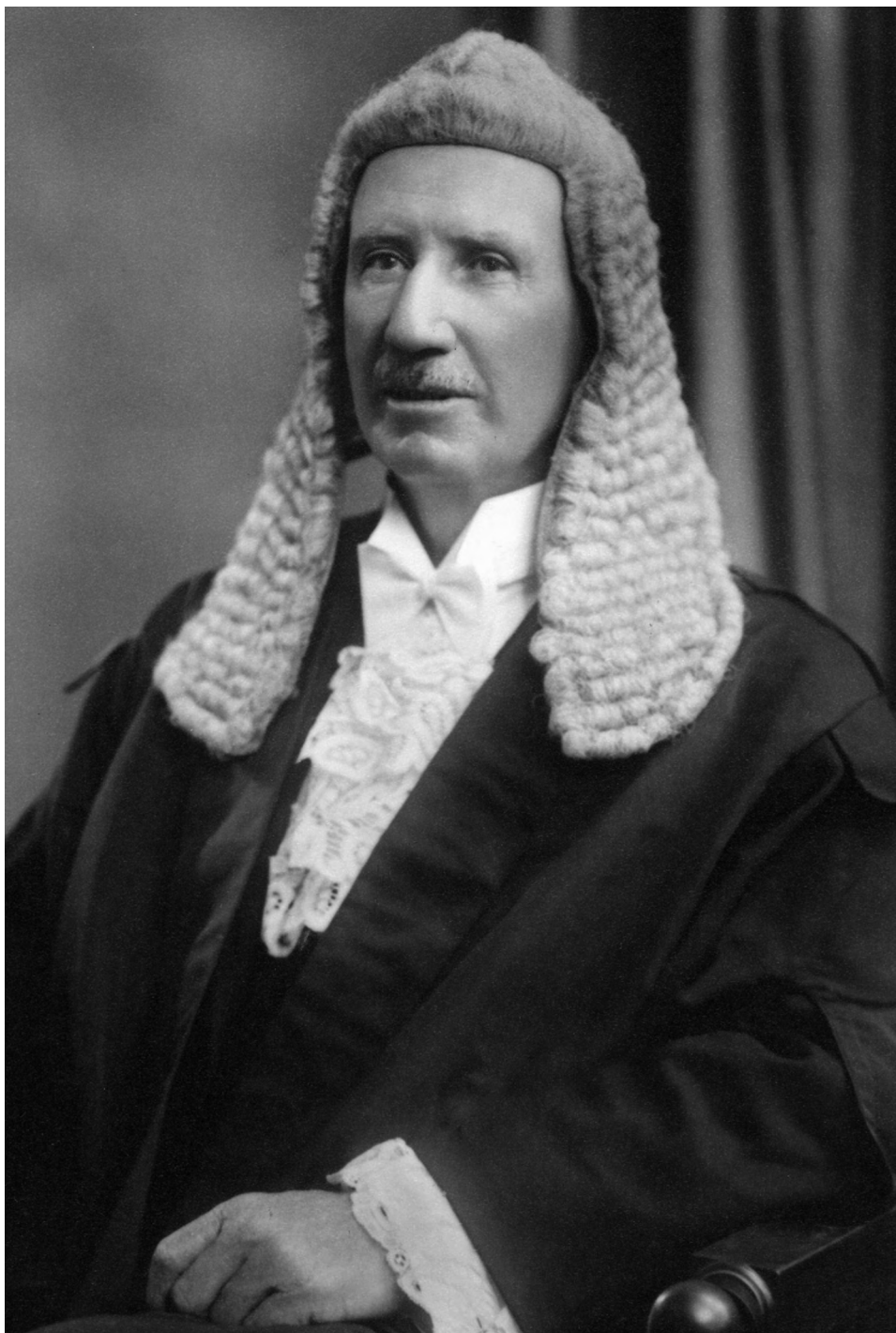


Figure 39: George Mackay.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

in the hope of taking up new land in the Cooran–Kin Kin district near Gympie. However, in October 1905, Mackay missed out in the ballot for blocks. He instead entered a partnership with Raymond John King to open a local auctioneering and real estate business. In 1906 Mackay became honorary secretary of the committee that established the Wide Bay Co-operative Dairy Association and its butter factory. He joined local debating societies, the Masonic lodge, and the Gympie Chamber of Commerce and Mines, became a justice of the peace, and began his longstanding membership of Gympie's hospital, ambulance, and agricultural show society committees. In October 1908, his business partnership was dissolved but at about the same time Mackay selected and began developing a farm at Cooroy, which he was to hold for three years. The year after the purchase, he stood with George Alexander Buist for the anti-Labor People's Progressive League in the state seat of Gympie—then a two-member electorate. They campaigned energetically but failed to unseat the sitting Australian Labor Party (ALP) members, George Ryland and Daniel Mulcahy.

In April 1910, Mackay and a young accountant, William Phillips Watts, opened an auctioneering firm based in central Gympie. The authority and fluency required of an auctioneer resulted in Mackay developing skills in reading and persuading crowds—invaluable preparation for the demands of politics and the Speakership. He 'made a practice of speaking to the back of the hall during electioneering, because the people he had to win over were there, and their interjections enlivened the meetings and enabled him to think what to say next' (Mackay 1983). In February 1911, Mackay was elected to Gympie City Council, where he was outspoken on the responsible use of council finances. The next year, when Gympie became a one-member electorate, he stood again for the People's Progressive League. George Ryland was again the ALP candidate, but Daniel Mulcahy's insistence on running as an independent split the vote, and thus Mackay narrowly outpolled Ryland. From then on, hecklers liked to remind Mackay that he should thank Mulcahy for his success. He did not contest the local council election in 1914, preferring to concentrate on his business interests and parliamentary duties.

Despite his lack of parliamentary experience, Mackay's ability as a public speaker led to his delivering the address-in-reply to the governor's opening speech to parliament in July 1912. He spoke for only half of his allotted hour, mostly about the Gympie goldfield, and was 'warmly applauded from both sides of the Chamber' (*Gympie Times* 1912, 3). During his one term in the Queensland parliament, Mackay promoted the interests of his mining, farming, and business constituents. He petitioned the government to spend more on the mining fields, supported the new Mary Valley railway, and found a new site for Gympie High School. He worked closely with Harry Walker, the member for the neighbouring seat of Cooroora, and when the federal seat of Lilley was created in 1913, they assisted the successful campaign to elect the proprietor of the *Gympie Times*, Jacob Stumm.

The state election of May 1915 resulted in the heavy defeat of the Liberal government. Although Mackay again campaigned energetically, he lost his seat, but admitted that this 'lifted a great load of responsibility from his shoulders' (*Gympie Times* 1915, 3). In June 1915, his business partnership with Watts was dissolved, but he continued in business for two more years, on his own and in short-term partnerships. When he was re-elected to Gympie City Council in 1916, his parliamentary experience gave him the confidence to be more outspoken. In wartime, he and his wife devoted themselves to such fundraising causes as the Red Cross. As mayor in 1917, he 'hated to hear the doorbell ring' (Mackay 1983) for fear that it signalled the arrival of telegrams notifying local families of casualties.

Mackay contested the federal seat of Lilley for the Nationalist Party in May 1917, replacing Stumm, who had come under attack for his German origins. With Stumm's support, Mackay won the seat and held it easily at six subsequent elections. Although boundary changes later placed Gympie outside Lilley, Gympie remained his home. For most of his federal career, he was a modest backbencher, speaking occasionally on matters directly relevant to his constituents, including immigration, land settlement, government finance, and such products as butter, sugar, and pineapples. His calls for a prohibitive duty on Fijian bananas earned him the title of the 'Banana King', but his intervention to support the controversial theories of the long-range weather forecaster Inigo Jones was unsuccessful. Industrious and conscientious, Mackay disliked 'extremists and muddlers' (*Gympie Times* 1917, 2) and had friends on both sides of the House. From 1920 to 1928, he served on the Joint Committee on Public Works, chairing it from 1926 to 1928. In May 1928, the committee won the House's support for its recommendation to commence construction of the Australian War Memorial as soon as practicable, only to have the project delayed by the onset of the Depression. From June to October 1928, he was a member of the Australian delegation to an Empire Parliamentary Association conference in Canada. He served as Temporary Chairman of Committees from 1929 to 1931.

In December 1931, Joseph Lyons led the United Australia Party—formed from the old National Party and breakaway ALP members—to victory at the federal election. On 17 February 1932, Mackay was elected, unopposed, as Speaker, having been nominated and seconded by two future Speakers, Archie Cameron and Walter Nairn. His elevation was seen by the press as a reward for his long parliamentary service, but it also reflected his reputation for impartiality and calm—qualities sorely needed amid the turmoil arising from the Depression. Unlike his predecessor, Norman Makin, Mackay chose to wear the Speaker's wig and gown, and had the mace returned to its traditional place in the chamber. Governor-General Sir Isaac Isaacs loaned the wig.

In his two and a half years as Speaker, Mackay showed that he had learnt much from his wide community experience and years in politics. Despite initial concerns that he would fail to maintain order, he presided firmly but tactfully, using what Makin

described as ‘a smooth satin kind of voice’ and a ‘manner that took the edge off certain bitterness arising in the debate’ (c. 1962). He demonstrated a sound knowledge of standing orders and was seen by members and the press alike as being impartial in his rulings. His wife, Edith, sometimes made the long trip from Gympie to Canberra to assist with the social activities associated with the Speakership.

A fleeting challenge to Mackay’s authority arose from his October 1933 decision that offensive remarks that had been ruled out of order would not be recorded in *Hansard*. The House supported the ruling, but the Lang Labor firebrand Eddie Ward objected, claiming that Mackay was ‘influenced by a desire on the part of honorable members who support the Government to have certain remarks expunged from Hansard’ (H.R. Deb. 19.10.1933, 3617). The following month, Mackay ruled that women wearing slacks would not be banned from the House and its precincts, pronouncing that the style ‘may be unconventional, but I would hesitate to say that they are more immodest than some short skirts which one sees’ (*Argus* 1933, 7). As his ruling was not matched by the President of the Senate, the announcement was taken by the press as implying that women so attired should avoid crossing an invisible dividing line running down the middle of King’s Hall.

Mackay’s announcement in March 1934 that he would retire from parliament at the next election was a surprise to his colleagues and the press. He explained that his decision arose from unspecified personal reasons and the danger that ‘one may remain in parliament too long’ (H.R. Deb. 1.8.1934, 1145). According to Mackay’s son, worries about ‘things that had occurred’ (Mackay 1983) were making him anxious and he was not looking forward to the demands of another parliamentary term. Nevertheless, he attended every one of the 154 sitting days in 1934. Significantly, opposition leader James Scullin was effusive in farewelling Mackay, telling him that ‘the aptitude with which you fitted yourself for the position within a few days of your election to it won the admiration of every one who has been privileged to witness the manner in which you have discharged your functions’ (H.R. Deb. 1.8.1934, 1144).

George and Edith Mackay enjoyed a long retirement in Gympie, eventually celebrating sixty years of marriage. In 1952, Mackay published *A Summary of the History of the Gympie Presbyterian Church*, commenting with self-deprecating humour that possibly ‘these pages will, by some critics, be regarded as the next-of-kin to the State Electoral Roll’. A man of impressive bearing who dressed immaculately, Mackay maintained his youthful fitness for most of his life. Devoted to lawn bowls, he became president of the Gympie Bowling Club (1936–39) and in 1955 received a Long Service Jewel for fifty years of service to Freemasonry. He never learnt to drive a car but maintained his independence well into his old age.

Injured in a fall in his garden, Mackay died in Gympie Hospital of lung and bone cancer on 5 November 1961 at the age of eighty-nine. After a state funeral at St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, he was interred in the Two Mile Cemetery

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beside his wife, who had died three years earlier. He was survived by his son and three granddaughters. Mackay had lived so quietly in retirement that when he died few people in Gympie remembered him. His portrait by A. E. Newbury is in Parliament House.

This article supplements the original Volume 10 ADB biography, published 1986, authored by Elaine Brown. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mackay-george-hugh-7378/text12821

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