

Makin, Norman John: Speaker 1929–1931

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Norman John Oswald Makin (1889–1982), ambassador and seventh Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 31 March 1889 at Petersham, Sydney, elder son of John Hulme Makin, pattern-maker, and his wife, Elizabeth, née Yates, both born in Lancashire, England. After emigrating, his father had found work at the Eveleigh railway workshops at Redfern. Norman moved with his family in 1891 to Melbourne, where a neighbour introduced him to the Albert Park Wesleyan Church. In 1898 the family moved again, to Broken Hill where Norman experienced the straitened circumstances of economic depression. He studied at Broken Hill Superior Public School, and his attendance at the local Methodist church consolidated his religious convictions as well as providing opportunities to develop skills in public speaking. Largely self-educated, he later recalled discovering literary greats such as John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle and saw himself as a ‘lad of serious thinking’ (Makin c. 1962), who early on dedicated himself to public service and the teachings of John Wesley. Aged thirteen, he left school to work as a draper’s parcel-boy, and then in a bookstore. In 1903 he joined the Shop Assistants’ Union of New South Wales and witnessed the 1908–09 miners’ strike and the militant industrial action of the socialist campaigner Thomas Mann. In 1908 he joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and became a pattern-maker.

Makin developed an early fascination with parliament. During a six-month sojourn in Melbourne in 1910–11, he was enthralled to watch from the public gallery some of the giants of the early Commonwealth, including Alfred Deakin, Andrew Fisher, and Sir John Forrest. In 1911 he moved to South Australia, primarily to follow Ruby Florence Jennings, whom he married on 10 August 1912 at Brompton Methodist Church, Adelaide. From 1912 he worked in a foundry at Kapunda and with the Gawler engineering firm James Martin & Co., which built locomotives.

Unsuccessfully contesting the South Australian state seat of Barossa (1915) and the federal seat of Wakefield (1917), Makin nonetheless won admiration within the ranks of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) for his outspoken opposition to Prime Minister

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 40: Norman Makin.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

William Morris Hughes's efforts in 1916 and 1917 to introduce conscription. He served as state ALP president in 1918–19 and 1929–30. In 1918 he wrote *A Progressive Democracy*, which outlined the history and policies of the ALP's South Australian branch. The following year, he was elected to the safe federal Labor seat of Hindmarsh. In March 1923, he took a decisive step towards the Speakership when Speaker William Watt cast around both sides of the House for members to appoint as Temporary Chairmen of Committees. Makin came to attention when the member for Melbourne Ports, James Mathews, noticed him earnestly studying the standing orders. Watt overcame his initial concern that Makin was too young to hold official parliamentary office, with the eventual result that Makin 'became more convinced that the Speakership would one day be an office in the Parliament that I would occupy' (Makin 1982, 62).

The provisional parliament building in Canberra seemed in 1927 to most members to be less convenient and less comfortable than its Melbourne predecessor. Makin looked forward to a permanent building that, as 'an imposing edifice', would 'truly symbolise national greatness in all its phases within the life and purpose of the Australian nation' (1982, 65). He was secretary of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in 1928–29 and 1934–41. Following the election of the government of James Scullin in October 1929, he did not seek selection for the ministry and instead easily fended off two other parliamentarians interested in the Speakership. One of his supporters was an ambitious member of just over a year's standing, John Curtin. Makin was elected Speaker on 20 November 1929. Although he pledged publicly to uphold the traditions of office, he more discreetly told the Clerk of the House, Ernest Parkes, that 'we are here to create precedent as well as to be guided by it' (Makin 1982, 68). Parkes, a seasoned parliamentary officer, reportedly responded helpfully that 'I can always find a precedent for any ruling likely to be given by you' (Makin 1982, 68). Regard for parliamentary tradition did not prevent Makin from objecting to what he considered demeaning trappings of office. As Speaker, he eschewed the gown and wig, while generously accepting the Clerk's choice to don them, thereby consolidating as ALP practice the stance taken by his predecessor, Charles McDonald, in 1910. The new Speaker instead sported a distinctive black suit and bow tie and shunned the mace as 'a relic of barbarism', declaring that he was 'quite capable' of asserting the Speaker's authority without it (H.R. Deb. 21.11.1929, 69). He decried politicians' failure to get on with one another and attributed this to 'an absence of the spirit of God in Parliament' (*Argus* 1931, 6).

As Speaker, Makin was particularly concerned to remain impartial, despite pressure from some party colleagues. When threatening to name the unruly Rowley James, a Lang Labor member who had broken with the government, he simultaneously rebuked Prime Minister Scullin for interjecting, thereby unexpectedly winning James's admiration for his impartiality. Throughout the tumultuous disintegration

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of Scullin's government, Makin considered himself to have 'maintained a calm and judicial composure that surprised many' (c. 1962). Looking back, he wondered whether he had been too strict.

In October 1930, Makin received a proposal from the acting prime minister, James Fenton, to bring parliamentary staff under the Public Service Act. He replied that if 'each House of the Parliament is to retain its supremacy and its authority under the Constitution to so conduct its affairs as it deemed right and proper, then it does appear to me that of necessity it must retain control of its particular staff' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 428). (Sir) Walter Kingsmill, President of the Senate, agreed and the proposal was dropped. In the same year, Makin ruled out of order an attempt by opposition leader (Sir) John Latham to expel E. G. Theodore from parliament following a royal commission finding that, as premier of Queensland, Theodore had committed 'fraud and dishonesty' in relation to the 1922 purchase of the Mungana mine by the Queensland government. Makin considered this was not a matter of concern to the Commonwealth, and he had Parkes and others unearth a century-old British precedent to support his ruling.

The main controversy of Makin's Speakership was the exclusion from the House of the Melbourne *Herald* correspondent Joseph Alexander. In March 1931, the newspaper published confidential cables on fiscal policy that Scullin had exchanged with Fenton and his acting treasurer of the time, Joseph Lyons, when visiting London. The Commonwealth Investigation Branch found that Lyons's files had been tampered with, but Alexander refused to divulge how he had obtained the cables. On 23 April, Makin invited Alexander to explain why he should not be banned. Alexander pleaded that the cables were not parliamentary documents and the Speaker should not act as an instrument of the executive. Makin invoked the dignity of parliament in excluding Alexander, to uphold 'the safe custody of all documents and papers that resided in or passed through the agencies of the House of Representatives' (Makin 1982, 69).

The next day, the Nationalist member James Bayley moved that expulsion of a journalist was for the House to decide. Makin responded by declaring that 'while I remain in the Chair I shall be the master of the situation in which I am placed' (H.R. Deb. 24.4.1931, 1281). Latham and the Country Party leader, (Sir) Earle Page, both argued that the Speaker had exceeded his authority. The resulting tied vote was resolved by Makin exercising the Speaker's power to deliver a casting vote. From 1 May to 23 September, Alexander was excluded from the precincts of the House but not from the Senate. This led to his attempting to monitor the House from a position just on the Senate side of King's Hall, before the *Herald's* managing director, (Sir) Keith Murdoch, recalled him to Melbourne. He returned to the House after the Australian Journalists' Association engineered a compromise whereby he provided

an assurance that he had obtained the cables in the ordinary course of his work as a journalist and would 'accept the standards of journalistic conduct outlined by the Prime Minister' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 440).

Soon after, Makin again defended the House when he described a question on the notice paper as offensive to the director-general of posts and telegraphs. He declared that, as Speaker, he would 'require questions of doubtful propriety to be submitted to me so that I may ensure the observance of decorum and correct procedure' (H.R. Deb. 5.6.1931, 2551). Twenty-four years later, as a backbencher, he was one of only four ALP members to vote for the jailing of newspaper proprietor Raymond Fitzpatrick and journalist Frank Browne over a breach of parliamentary privilege.

Even a Speaker as steadfastly impartial as Makin could not avoid the schisms engulfing the Scullin government. In June 1931, another Lang supporter, Eddie Ward, asked Makin to publicly confirm that unnamed sources connected with the Adelaide Stock Exchange had tried to bribe him to join Lyons in breaking with Labor. Makin told the House that he was 'not flattered' by attempts to induce him to 'leave a movement with which I have been associated all my life, and that there was no price, either electoral support or any other, that could buy me' (H.R. Deb. 5.6.1931, 2497). Speaking as a private member during the committee stage of the Financial Emergency Bill, he condemned the government's deflationary Premiers' Plan, saying it 'must inevitably lead to the accentuation of the depression from which the country is suffering' (H.R. Deb. 9.7.1931, 3639).

Makin was better known to the Australian public as Speaker than for any other achievement of his long career. When, early in 1930, residents of the Adelaide suburb of Chicago cast around for a new local name, the press playfully proposed 'Makinville' before Kilburn was chosen. At the end of his Speakership in November 1931, he elicited warm statements of appreciation that were a striking contrast to the polarised politics of the time. Lyons, as opposition leader, thanked him for 'the impartiality, the firmness and the courage which you have invariably displayed' (H.R. Deb. 26.11.1931, 1931), and the government's long-serving member for Melbourne, William Maloney, declared that 'no Speaker, in my experience, has held the scales more evenly than you' (H.R. Deb. 26.11.1931, 1932–33). More irreverently, *Smith's Weekly* dubbed him 'Holy Norman' (1931, 7).

Makin remained so respectful of the office of Speaker that in 1962 he prepared an unpublished guide entitled 'Mr Speaker—A Manual of Parliamentary History, Procedures and Usages Including Political and Military Records of the Speakers of the Commonwealth Parliament'. It included biographies of all Commonwealth Speakers to date, including a memoir of his own Speakership written in the third person. Drawing on his long parliamentary experience, he considered the three best Speakers

were Sir Frederick Holder, whom he had not witnessed, Charles McDonald, and William Watt. His assessments were generous; Carty Salmon and Archie Cameron were among the few he criticised.

As federal president of the ALP (1936–38), Makin represented his party at the 1937 coronation of King George VI. He was a member of the Standing Orders Committee (1932–46, 1956–63) and the Advisory War Council (1940–45), and served as minister for the navy and for munitions (1941–46) and minister for aircraft production (1945–46) in the Curtin and Chifley governments. In 1946 he led the Australian delegation to the London meeting of the newly formed General Assembly of the United Nations. By virtue of Australia's alphabetical advantage, he was the first president (1946) of the UN Security Council. Sir Paul Hasluck recalled that Makin made up for a lack of diplomatic experience by drawing on his time as Speaker to prove a capable presiding officer. He resigned from parliament in 1946 to represent Australia in Washington, DC, and became the first Australian ambassador to the United States of America when the legation was upgraded to an embassy. His time in Washington coincided with an escalation of the Cold War. He was a member of the Far Eastern Commission, which considered the future of postwar Japan, and was also a governor of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Described by the diplomat Sir Laurence McIntyre as having been 'out of his depth in the Washington environment' (1975), Makin was not familiar with the details of foreign policy, but he took advice, made shrewd observations, and showed common sense. A teetotaler and non-smoker, he eschewed the Washington cocktail circuit; some people mocked him when, to save money on flowers, the Makins installed a mechanical fountain as the centrepiece of the embassy dining table. Skilled at reading 'grassroots' opinion, he was the only member of the Australian Embassy to predict Harry Truman's 1948 election as president. As a lay preacher, he gave sermons at Foundry Methodist Church, Washington.

Returning to Australia in 1951, Makin won the federal seat of Sturt in 1954, defeating (Sir) Keith Wilson. After a redistribution in 1955, he served as the member for Bonython until his retirement in 1963. He published *Federal Labour Leaders* in 1961. In 1980 he was appointed AO, and the Methodist Church gave him a certificate in recognition of his seventy-five years of lay ministry.

Short and slim, Makin was dignified, courteous, and considerate. He was hard-working and sincere, consistently representing the interests of the working classes, particularly in the fight against poverty; he spoke of the need to protect them from the ravages of commercialism and finance. At the end of his career as a parliamentarian and diplomat, Makin recalled that 'no place or position gave me greater satisfaction than that of being the Speaker of the Commonwealth Parliament of Australia' (1982, 67). Widowed in 1979, he died on 20 July 1982 at Glenelg, South Australia,

and was cremated. Later that year, his two sons published *The Memoirs of Norman John Oswald Makin*. In 1984 a new federal electorate in South Australia was named after him. His portrait by John Rowell is held by Parliament House.

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