

Martin, Stephen Paul: Speaker 1993–1996

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Stephen Paul Martin, economist and twenty-first Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 24 June 1948 at Wollongong, New South Wales, one of three children of New Zealand-born Harold Edward Martin, clerk and accountant, and his wife, Vera Marion. Stephen was to remain personally and professionally committed to the city of his birth for most of his life. He attended Wollongong High School, then obtained a bachelor of arts degree from The Australian National University (1968) and a diploma in education from the University of New South Wales (1969). From 1970 to 1973, he worked as a New South Wales state high school teacher. He completed a master of arts at the University of Alberta, Canada (1974), and, on his return to Australia, lectured in economics at the University of Wollongong (1974–77). From 1977 to 1984, he worked as a town planner for the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment, while completing a master of town and country planning degree at the University of Sydney (1982).

Martin later recalled in his first speech to the House of Representatives that Gough Whitlam ‘shook from me the shackles of political apathy’ (H.R. Deb. 26.2.1985, 202). He joined the Australian Labor Party, held various party positions in the Illawarra region, was an alderman on the Wollongong City Council (1983–85), and gained further local prominence by serving as a rugby league referee. At the December 1984 election, he won the federal seat of Macarthur, which then encompassed the northern suburbs of Wollongong and some semi-rural areas extending westward to Picton and the Burragorang Valley. As a backbencher, Martin gained prominence by chairing the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration (1987–91), and particularly its 1991 inquiry into the consequences of deregulation of the banking industry. The resultant report, *A Pocket Full of Change*, came a decade after the Campbell committee of inquiry had sparked the first steps towards deregulation, and considered for the coming decade requirements for improved competition, stronger prudential supervision, and the fairer treatment of consumers. Although the banking system had become more efficient and finance was

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 41: Stephen Martin.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

more widely available, the report proposed such improvements as a code of conduct for rates and charges, and the placing of smaller banks and building societies under Reserve Bank of Australia supervision.

As an admirer of the leadership style of Treasurer Paul Keating, Martin supported his challenge to Bob Hawke for the prime ministership. He served as parliamentary secretary to the minister for foreign affairs and trade (1991–93) and reportedly lobbied unsuccessfully for the ministerial vacancy created by Graham Richardson's resignation in May 1992. A 1992 electoral redistribution shifted northern Wollongong from Macarthur to the adjoining seat of Cunningham, which was held by the former Hawke government minister Stewart West. This rendered Macarthur marginal for the Labor Party and, although some party leaders felt that Martin should stay to defend it, he successfully challenged West for preselection in Cunningham, declaring that his home and constituency would always be Wollongong. He won Cunningham at the March 1993 election and held it comfortably at the following three elections.

After the 1993 election, Martin was unopposed in the Labor caucus as the government's nominee to succeed Leo McLeay as Speaker, and in the House defeated the opposition's candidate, Don Dobie, 78 votes to 63 (VP 1993/7, 4.5.1993). Suggestions during the nomination process that his experience as a rugby league referee and high school teacher was sound preparation for the Speakership were only partly tongue-in-cheek. More earnestly, following his election by the House, he reflected that 'a sense of history of this place is something which we all strive to be part of', especially as this can teach 'how we might want to improve things for the future' (H.R. Deb. 4.5.1993, 16). Appropriately for a former referee, he was the first Speaker empowered to suspend a member for an hour without a vote by the House—known colloquially as sending the offender to the 'sin bin'. This echoed a power which Speakers had in earlier parliaments to order a member to withdraw for the remainder of the sitting.

The chamber over which Martin presided was dominated by Prime Minister Keating, the unexpected victor of the 1993 election. Martin recalled that opposition leader John Hewson seemed a 'broken man' (Bramston 2016, 543) following the loss. Keating established a similar ascendancy over Hewson's successor, Alexander Downer, but the political balance in the chamber became more even after John Howard resumed the Liberal Party leadership in January 1995. Martin recalled of this period as Speaker that 'my hair was black when I started; it was grey when I finished' (Bramston 2016, 596). Keating relished the more gladiatorial aspects of question time and did not accept that a Speaker should be wholly independent, later admitting that 'I did make it tougher for the Speaker' (O'Brien 2015, 591). A debate on an opposition motion censuring the prime minister on 24 February 1994 was particularly disorderly, with many interjections and members ignoring the chair. Martin subsequently rejected accusations of bias, but added that 'all of us should hang our heads in shame' (Brough 1994).

As Speaker, Martin was widely seen as more informal than his predecessors. The Clerk and Deputy Clerk no longer wore wigs and, following an overseas study tour, he proposed unsuccessfully that the House adopt electronic voting. He chaired the Standing Committee on the Televising of the House of Representatives (1993–96). Accusations that he favoured Keating came to a head in August 1995 after he ordered the opposition's Peter Costello from the chamber for throwing a copy of a speech across the dispatch box to Keating, but declined to apply the same penalty when the prime minister similarly tossed a document to Howard three days later. Martin left the chamber as the opposition moved a motion of dissent that led to yet further acrimonious exchanges. He was dismayed by Keating's behaviour and reportedly had a message passed to the prime minister's office threatening resignation (Bramston 2016, 597). Keating apologised in the House, saying: 'I am sorry if that issue caused you embarrassment' (H.R. Deb. 31.8.1995, 1030).

After Labor lost office at the 1996 election, Martin held a series of senior shadow ministerial positions, including defence and trade. In 1999 he was awarded a doctorate by the University of Wollongong for a thesis on financial deregulation under the Hawke and Keating governments, and was presented with the Centenary Medal in 2001. He resigned from parliament in August 2002 citing 'political burnout' (*PM* 2002). The ensuing by-election was made notable by the Australian Greens winning their first House of Representatives seat. Martin's commitment to politics had been concurrent with his longstanding interest in sports. He refereed the 1984 Illawarra Rugby League grand final and, in 1989, became a director of the Illawarra Steelers rugby league club, but resigned in protest in 1996 over the dismissal of the club coach and the club's reluctance to open talks with News Limited on Super League. He was also a patron of the Illawarra Academy of Sport.

In 2002 Martin accepted a professorship in economics at the University of Wollongong, and would serve as president and chief executive officer of its subsidiary, the University of Wollongong in Dubai (2004). He served in various senior roles for other universities, including as pro vice chancellor international at Victoria University, Melbourne (2005–08), deputy vice chancellor strategy and planning at Curtin University, Perth (2008–10), and as a professor at the Graduate School of Management, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales (2010–11), as well as working as a private consultant. He was appointed chief executive officer of the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (2011–17), continuing its program of research and hosting of events featuring economic and political leaders, including prime ministers and Reserve Bank governors, and also boosting its social media presence. Martin chaired the Australian subsidiary of the Bank of China, the Men of League Foundation, a national charity supporting members of the rugby league community who are in need, and the Global Science and Technology Forum, Singapore, and also became a professorial fellow at Sydney Business School. He has

three daughters and a son. As a parliamentarian, he was known for his friendly manner; John Howard summed him up in the vernacular as ‘a pretty good bloke’ (*PM* 2002). A portrait by Wesley Barton Walters is held at Parliament House.

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