

McDonald, Charles: Speaker 1910–1913, 1914–1917

Brian F. Stevenson

Charles McDonald (1860–1925), watchmaker, trade unionist, and third Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 25 August 1860 in North Melbourne, son of Scottish-born Charles Thomas Young McDonald, confectioner, and his English-born wife, Harriet, née Pape. The McDonalds moved between four colonies as new goldfields were discovered, Charles spending much of his childhood in the Mudjee district of New South Wales. Although an average student at Mudjee Public School, he excelled in history and geography. His early interest in stamp collecting and fretwork fostered the ‘patience, care and neatness’ (Makin c. 1962) that characterised him as an adult. He left school to become an apprentice printer, but later worked as a watchmaker and jeweller in country New South Wales. In 1888 he moved to Queensland to start his own business at Charters Towers. A journalist later said jocularly that the frequently fiery McDonald, drawing on his profession, no doubt possessed ‘knowledge of mechanism useful in manufacturing bombs, you know!’ (sic., *Queenslander* 1897, 317).

McDonald did not stay self-employed for long, becoming convinced from his reading that ‘the Labour movement was the only movement that would emancipate the great mass of humanity’ (*Evening Telegraph* 1911). Charters Towers and its burgeoning labour movement provided fertile ground for attempting to put his ideals into practice. Despite watchmakers and jewellers not being occupationally inclined to unionism, he was accepted as an organiser with the Mining and Accident Association and became secretary of the Land Nationalisation League. He responded to comments about this seeming incongruity by claiming to have been born on a goldfield and, more accurately, to have ‘knocked about them all his life’ (*Northern Miner* 1890, 3). He strengthened his working-class credentials by involvement in such causes as a miners’ strike over change room conditions. In February 1890, he became the first acting secretary of the Charters Towers Republican Association.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

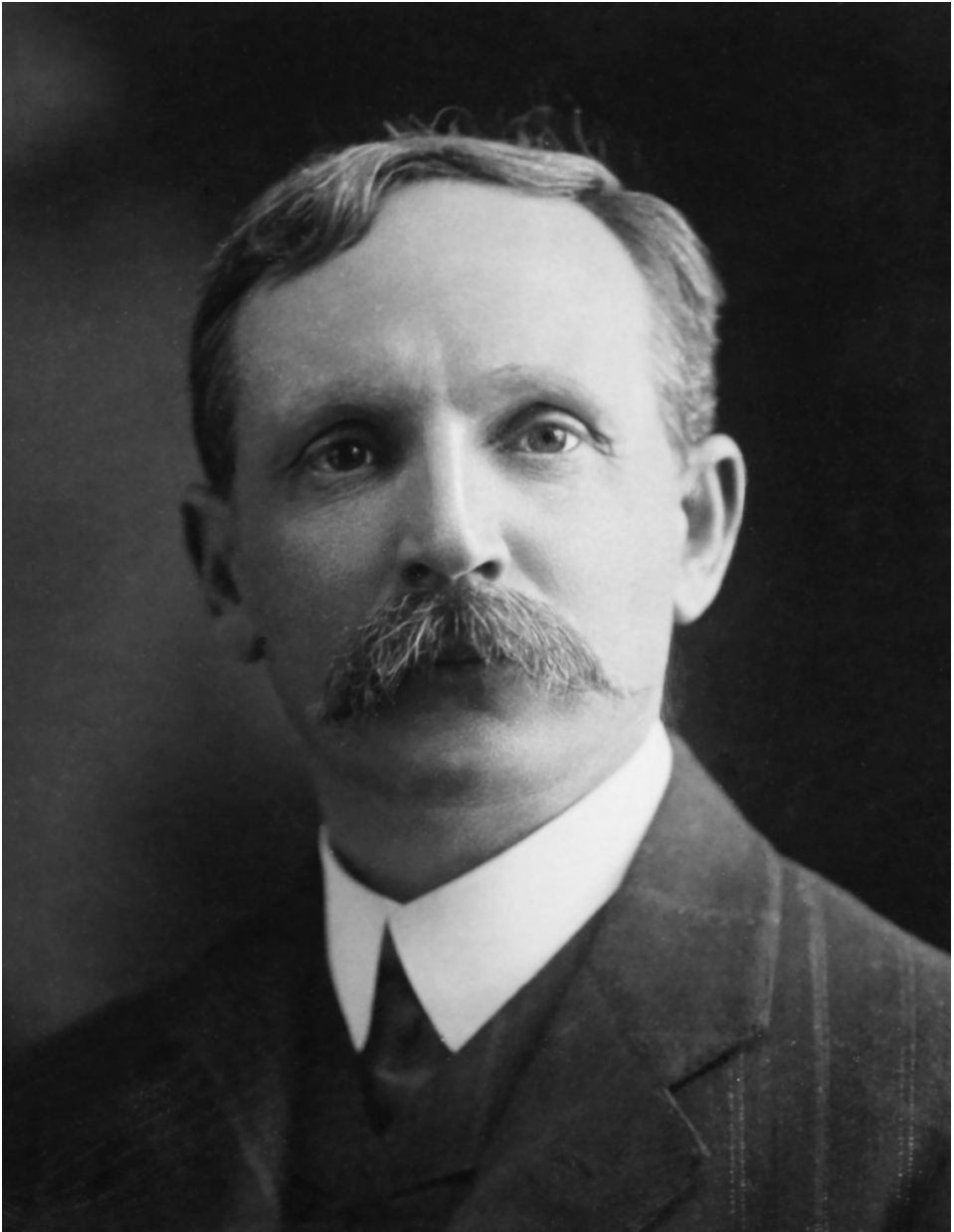


Figure 42: Charles McDonald.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

The potential for a central body to safeguard the rights of all unionised workers drew McDonald to the Australian Labour Federation (ALF), formed in 1889 and, despite its name, Queensland-oriented. In April 1890, he spoke in public in favour of a new central body at Charters Towers, 'so that all labourers could mutually protect their interests' (Sullivan 1973, 160). A Charters Towers District Council of the ALF was duly formed, and he had little trouble persuading the local mining union to join it. He was a delegate to the inaugural meeting of the ALF general council in August 1890 in Brisbane, where he was elected its first president (1890–92). In August the following year, he became vice-president of the Queensland-based Associated Workers' Union, Australia's first combined union open to all workers. His engagement with the unsuccessful maritime strike of 1890 and the shearers' strikes that followed reflected his growing leadership role with the ALF. When local miners wanted to retain unspent money that was originally raised to help the strikers, he supported it instead being channelled to the ALF.

A shift away from utopian socialism was apparent in McDonald's and the ALF leadership's increasing moderation, fuelled by the failure of the maritime strike. At Gympie, Queensland, in August 1890, he had told the miners that 'the Australian Labour Federation platform as agreed upon was straight out Socialism', for which there were 'no half and half measures' (Sullivan 1973, 343). The following month, he stressed that the platform was only 'for the purpose of eliciting the opinions of the various districts' and 'the proposed reforms would only have been sought to be brought about by constitutional methods' (*Brisbane Courier* 1890). In January 1891, he and ALF secretary Albert Hinchcliffe were unsuccessful in warning shearers in central Queensland against strike action. Amid such fraught manoeuvrings, on 11 October 1892 McDonald married Mary Ann Tregear, a milliner, at Charters Towers. They were to have one daughter.

Defeat in these great strikes turned the labour movement towards a parliamentary-based strategy. McDonald was one of sixteen Labor candidates elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly in April 1893, representing the seat of Flinders. The parliamentary officer and future Clerk of the Assembly Charles Bernays recalled that 'there was among them no more active, earnest and energetic worker than Charles McDonald, arriving from Flinders, one of the widest and most inaccessible of our Western constituencies' (1919, 145). Long-distance solo travel by bicycle became the personal trademark of this inveterate political proselytiser, who was said to have 'travelled more over Queensland on the wheel than any man living' (*Queenslander* 1897, 317).

As a republican 'of the red-hot order', McDonald made 'wonderfully strong speeches for such a little man', but his candour 'put some people's teeth on edge' (*Queenslander* 1897). His stormiest moment in the Legislative Assembly came on 11 September 1894 during debate on the Peace Preservation Bill, enacted by the conservative government of (Sir) Hugh Nelson to deal with another major

'ORDER, ORDER!'

shearers' strike. A clash with the Speaker and Chairman of Committees saw seven Labor members removed from the chamber, with McDonald among them shouting as he went: 'A brutal Speaker and a brutal Government!' (Qld LA 1894, 523). He and two others later took out writs against the Speaker, claiming damages for assault, trespass, and false imprisonment. Being on the losing side in this particular episode may have inspired his determination to master parliamentary procedure, becoming one who 'sleeps with the Standing Orders under his pillow' (*Queenslander* 1897, 317). At first, his interjections in the chamber were of nuisance value only, but 'when he really began to show the results of his close study he came to be recognised by the Speaker, the Chairman, and the House generally as one worth listening to on questions of procedure' (Bernays 1919, 145).

By 1899, Labor was the second-largest party in the Queensland parliament and, for a week in December 1899, one of McDonald's colleagues, Anderson Dawson, led the world's first Labor government. McDonald initially denounced the growing Federation movement as 'a middle-class device for diverting attention from the needs of Labour' (Bolton 1972, 210). This was a minority view in the mining towns and coastal ports of north Queensland, including Charters Towers, which in 1899 voted strongly for Federation. He resigned from the Queensland parliament to successfully contest the vast new federal electorate of Kennedy in 1901, which he retained easily for the next twenty-four years.

McDonald seized an early opportunity to make himself conspicuous in the Commonwealth parliament. Towards the end of its first sitting day, 9 May 1901, he inserted a jarring note into otherwise celebratory proceedings by complaining that no standing orders were in place for the new House of Representatives. When Prime Minister (Sir) Edmund Barton assured him that they would be tabled the next morning, ready for use when the parliament resumed on 21 May, McDonald was not mollified: 'There may be very objectionable features in them ... in some of the States there are in force the most iniquitous standing orders that were ever framed in any British-speaking community' (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1901, 27). Barton assured him that 'honourable members will not be asked to assent to even their temporary adoption until they have had them for several days, and have had every opportunity to read them' (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1901, 28).

The rise of McDonald to the Speakership was sequential, starting with his June 1901 election to the panel of Temporary Chairmen of Committees. He also was appointed a member of Select Committees on Electoral Act Administration (1904) and Ocean Shipping Services (1905), doing outstanding work on both (Makin c. 1962). In June 1906, he displaced Carty Salmon as Chairman of Committees—the result of some Free Trade members being sufficiently unhappy with the incumbent's performance to join Labor members in voting for McDonald (VP 1906/21–22, 20.6.1906). When Labor won an absolute majority in both Houses in 1910 under the leadership of

fellow Queenslander Andrew Fisher, McDonald was the party's choice as Speaker. The redoubtable trade union pioneer William Guthrie Spence, in moving that McDonald be elected Speaker, praised his impartiality as Chairman of Committees and his knowledge of rules both of the Australian and the British parliaments. George Fairbairn, the Fusionist member for Fawkner and one-time president of the Melbourne Club, objected that McDonald's signing of the Labor pledge would compromise his impartiality, and a future Speaker, (Sir) William Elliot Johnson, agreed that someone so prone to 'violent partisanship' (H.R. Deb. 1.7.1910, 27) was not suited to the position. But McDonald's performance as Chairman of Committees had been strong enough to brush aside such objections and a half-hearted effort to retain Salmon. His election, 39 votes to 25, marked an early rejection of the principle of a Westminster-style independent Speaker (VP 1910/4–5, 1.7.1910).

With his party's approval, McDonald was the first Speaker of the House to dispense with the wig and gown. This was matched by the new President of the Senate, Henry Turley, and established a precedent for all Speakers drawn from the Labor Party. He also declined to use the mace as a symbol of authority. When McDonald, now residing at Kew in suburban Melbourne, visited Charters Towers in March 1911, he was applauded by his constituents for affirming that, as Speaker, 'he endeavoured to follow out the one golden rule, to be fair to both sides' (*Evening Telegraph* 1911, 6).

Who worthily the chair doth fill.
McDonald wants no wig or gown—
His dignity's sufficient crown.
He rules the House with iron hand—
No tricks or nonsense will he stand.
But members know the game is fair
While Queensland Charlie fills the chair. (*Truth* 1915, 6)

As a Speaker in wartime, McDonald came under pressure concerning the content of *Hansard*. Prime Minister William Morris Hughes, anxious to appease Australia's nominal ally Japan, demanded the excision of all mention of that nation from *Hansard* and that no unfriendly references be permitted in debate. The issue of conscription for active service overseas also raised sensitivities; after the Labor backbencher Joseph Hannan delivered a fiery speech in September 1916 condemning its proposed introduction, McDonald refused a request from the defence minister, (Sir) George Pearce, to omit some of Hannan's remarks from *Hansard*. His reasoning was that 'the omission of portions of the official reports of debates, even in the present exceptional circumstances, is highly objectionable, and, if allowed, must inevitably destroy the true value of the record'; he would only permit such omissions with 'the sanction of the House thereto' (McDonald 1912–17, 1916).

McDonald remained a keen student of parliamentary procedure. Pearce noticed when once visiting his office that he had diligently 'tabulated references to and rulings of the Speakers and Presiding Officers of practically every Parliament in the British Empire' (S. Deb. 13.1.1926, 14). But he also sought relief from the pressures of the Speakership. In partnership with his brother-in-law, he acquired a sheep station in north Queensland, which Makin saw as 'a welcome diversion from the exacting office in Parliament' (Makin c. 1962). Like his predecessor and successor as Speaker, Sir William Elliot Johnson, he painted for relaxation, executing bush scenes in watercolours.

In his later years, McDonald was afflicted by poor health. As early as 1913 he was rumoured to have had a 'paralytic stroke', but he assured a Charters Towers gathering that it was mere 'nerve trouble' from which he had already recovered (*Evening Telegraph* 1913, 1). Ensuing political events did not improve his health. When the Labor Party split over conscription in November 1916, he was one of those who remained behind as Hughes stormed out of the caucus room followed by his supporters, and he was at once elected temporary chair of caucus. He subsequently suffered a breakdown but remained Speaker under National Labor and Nationalist governments until the election of May 1917.

Ill health resulted in McDonald being granted three months' leave of absence from parliament in May 1924. A voyage to Britain in a bid to recuperate failed so abjectly that there were fears he might die on the journey home. He survived to resume his place in the House but was unable to take part in debates. Makin, by now his parliamentary colleague, saw him as 'a pathetic case', with 'tremulous head and hands' (Makin c. 1962) caused by Parkinson's disease. He suffered a stroke on 8 November 1925 at his Kew home and died five days later, survived by his wife and daughter. His death just one day before the federal election precipitated a situation unique in Australian federal political history. Because there was only one other candidate for McDonald's seat of Kennedy, his friend the Nationalist Grosvenor Francis, it was deemed that Francis had been elected. McDonald was buried in Boroondara Cemetery at Kew. James Scullin, a future prime minister, was among the pallbearers, as was the Clerk of the House, Walter Gale. In accordance with his wishes, McDonald's coffin was made of Queensland maple from his former home district. His private library—'a veritable treasure house' (Makin c. 1962) of rare books and pamphlets on politics—was gifted by his widow to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library.

A frugal and hardworking teetotaler, McDonald was known to the press variously as 'Fighting Charlie' or 'Fighting Mac'. While not 'a good or attractive speaker' in debate, he compensated by being 'as persistent as a summer fly when once he determined his attitude on a particular question' (Bernays 1919, 145). He reputedly believed that everything worth saying could be condensed into half an hour, despite once filibustering for more than six hours on the issue of employing Pacific Islanders

in government sugar mills. The journalist Herbert Campbell-Jones thought that the sparely built and stooped McDonald ‘conveyed the idea of a boundary rider ... tough as hickory [with] the nervous strength which makes the champion athlete’ (Campbell-Jones 1935, 317). His even-handedness in the chair may have owed much to his becoming Speaker in the latter half of his career when his health was starting to fade, muting his earlier intensity. The long-serving Labor member William Maloney remembered him as ‘beloved by every member on both sides’ and ‘animated always by a rigid sense of justice’ (H.R. Deb. 24.3.1927, 1082). An uncharacteristic ostentation was the wearing of ‘an eighty-guinea diamond ring which scintillated under the electric light and excited avarice in the ladies’ gallery’ (Bernays 1919, 146)—an evident legacy of his long-past days as a jeweller. His portrait by Josephine Muntz-Adams is in Parliament House.

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'ORDER, ORDER!'

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