

McGrath, David Charles: Chairman of Committees 1929–1931

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David Charles McGrath (1872–1934), storekeeper and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 10 November 1872 at Newtown, Scarsdale, Victoria, son of Irish-born David McGrath, miner, and his English-born wife, Evelyn, née Horsefield. Educated at Scarsdale State School and Creswick Grammar, Charles joined the family hay and corn store at Allendale, where he came to share his father's interest in politics, although they later joined opposing parties. He claimed to have enrolled some seven hundred members while secretary of the Allendale branch of the Australian Natives' Association. A keen sportsman, he made a name for himself as a stocky, energetic rover in the South Ballarat Australian Rules Football team during the 1890s. On 24 May 1898, he married Elizabeth Johnstone Gullan at the Talbot Street Presbyterian Church, Ballarat. They moved to Pitfield Plains in 1900 to open another McGrath store.

In 1902 McGrath helped to establish the Hollybush Social Democratic Club and, in 1904, he won the Legislative Assembly seat of Grenville for the Australian Labor Party. He took a close interest in the mining industry, often speaking in the chamber on behalf of mineworkers and small, independent operators who were threatened by larger capitalist enterprises. Outside the House, 'Bull' McGrath worked to expand the Labor Party's organisation in country areas, undertaking an extensive tour of Gippsland with his fellow state parliamentarian Frank Anstey in November 1904. As Anstey later recalled: 'We pedalled or pushed our bikes into country far remote from the railway lines' (Cook 1979, 386).

In May 1913, McGrath unexpectedly won the federal seat of Ballaarat (as it was then spelt), previously held by Alfred Deakin, following a close contest with H. V. McKay, the famed manufacturer of the Sunshine Harvester. Just six months later, he made a sensational attack on the Speaker of the House of Representatives, (Sir) William Elliot Johnson. Speaking at the Workers' Union Hall in Ballarat, as he did not feel he would be allowed to do so in the House, he claimed that Johnson had lost the confidence of the House. The Speaker had altered a *Hansard* proof concerning

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 43: Charles McGrath.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/7161 #PIC/7161/1-2, Richards & Co. Ballarat.

whether the Loan Bill had been carried, thereby 'acting in a biased manner, and proving himself to be a bitter partisan' (*Argus* 1913, 10). In the House soon after, McGrath refused to apologise and, following a long debate, was suspended from attending parliament for the rest of the session (VP 1913/151–53, 11.11.1913). Defiant as always, he left the chamber declaring that he had 'been hounded out by the Prime Minister and his gang' (H.R. Deb. 11.11.1913, 3053). On 29 April 1915, the House resolved that the decision of two years earlier be expunged from the House record as 'being subversive of the right of an honourable Member to freely address his constituents' (VP 1914–15/181, 29.4.1915).

At the election of 1914, McGrath held his seat with an increased majority and proceeded to press the government to improve soldiers' conditions. In March 1916 he enlisted, embarking as a staff sergeant with the 22nd Army Service Corps, Australian Imperial Force. Promoted to warrant officer in December 1916 and appointed to Australian Imperial Headquarters, he was transferred to No. 1 Company, 1st Army Service Corps, France, in 1917. Following a serious illness, he returned to Australia in April 1918 and was discharged as medically unfit. His commanding officer complained that, on the return voyage, McGrath was 'a nuisance wherever he was, having no idea of discipline or soldierly bearing' (NAA B2455).

Although re-elected unopposed during his absence in 1917, McGrath was defeated at the 1919 poll by one vote. On appeal, the result was declared void and he was returned with a handsome majority at a by-election in July 1920. During the early postwar years, he was a pugnacious advocate of repatriation benefits for servicemen and a stern critic of the means by which imperial honours were awarded. He was a member of the Joint Committee on Public Works from 1926 to 1929.

In the government of James Scullin, McGrath was Chairman of Committees (1929–31) and so—ironically enough in view of his earlier criticism of the Speaker—also acted as Deputy Speaker. Although his appointment by the House was unanimous, the opposition's Roland Green questioned his qualifications beyond numerous past clashes over the standing orders, to which he wryly agreed that, although he had 'not previously occupied the Chair, I have been in touch with it very often' (H.R. Deb. 20.11.1929, 18–19). Despite deafness in one ear, he could 'assure the members of the Opposition that both eyes have their vision unimpaired' (H.R. Deb. 20.11.1929, 19).

As the Depression overwhelmed Scullin's singularly luckless government, McGrath was increasingly drawn towards Sir Otto Niemeyer's orthodox solution to the nation's financial crisis. In March 1931 he followed Joseph Lyons out of the Labor Party. The Labor caucus voted that same month to replace him as Chairman of Committees with Lou Cunningham, only for McGrath to refuse to resign. He was rightly confident that the House would not vote him out as Scullin was not willing to test his government's support.

During the total of seven days in which he occupied the chair as Deputy Speaker, McGrath showed no sign of partisan behaviour such as he had alleged against Johnson. Dissent came briefly in May 1931 when the Labor member John Eldridge challenged his ruling that a member could not be questioned about an alleged statement in a newspaper that he claimed to be untrue (H.R. Deb. 29.5.1931, 2417–18). A few days later, when the notice was called on, Eldridge was found to be absent and so it was withdrawn from the notice paper (VP 1929–30–31/657, 3.6.1931). In the dying days of the Scullin government, McGrath clashed sharply with another former Labor member, the truculent Joel Moses Gabb, who accused him of uttering 'an untruth', and only withdrew the statement under pressure so as 'to conform with parliamentary procedure' (H.R. Deb. 22.10.1931, 1073).

At the December 1931 election, McGrath retained his seat, as a United Australia Party candidate. Despite press speculation that he would be elevated to the Speakership, he was passed over both for this and for reappointment as Chairman of Committees. He served in parliament until 1934, in failing health. On 31 July 1934, he died at his home in Ballarat. Mourned by the many ex-servicemen he had served so well, he was buried with military and Masonic honours in the Ballarat old cemetery. He was survived by his wife, two daughters, and two sons, one of whom, Charles, became chairman of Repco Ltd. As a federal parliamentarian, McGrath was renowned mainly for his success in winning and then holding Ballarat as a Labor member. A press obituary reported that his appearance was 'at normal times ... not the gentlest in the world' and 'at abnormal times there is no fiercer-looking face in the House' (*Canberra Times* 1930, 2).

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