

# McLeay, Sir John (Jack): Speaker 1956–1966

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Sir John McLeay (1893–1982), businessman, lord mayor, and longest-serving and thirteenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 23 November 1893 at Port Clinton, South Australia, second of six children of Australian-born parents George McLeay, farmer, and his wife, Marguaretta, née Barton. Jack was educated at Port Clinton public school and later, when the family moved to Adelaide for the sake of the children's education, at Unley Central School. Leaving school at fourteen, he took his first job as a grocer's boy with G. Wood Son & Co. Ltd. In 1906 he undertook a commercial course at Muirden College and subsequently became a commercial traveller for the glass and hardware merchants Thompson & Harvey. He was also an enthusiastic participant in basketball, football, cricket, tennis, lacrosse, and athletics.

On 13 May 1915, McLeay enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and served in medical units on Lemnos, in Egypt, and on the Western Front. As a stretcher-bearer with the 13th Field Ambulance, he was awarded the Military Medal for his initiative in organising the clearance of casualties while under heavy fire near Villers-Bretonneux, France, on 24 April 1918. Discharged as a lance corporal on 17 October 1919 in Adelaide, he joined his brother George in McLeay Bros, an accountancy and general agents firm, which later became a prominent wholesale and retail furnishing business. On 8 June 1921, at St Augustine's Church of England at Unley, he married Eileen Henderson Elden, who was to be his political sounding board until her death in 1972.

With his two brothers, George and Reginald, McLeay was recruited into St Andrews Debating Society by an elder of their Presbyterian church, the former premier A. H. Peake (*Advertiser* 1946, 8). George became secretary of the Liberal and Country League (LCL) and unsuccessfully contested the federal seat of Adelaide in 1922. John bitterly condemned as disloyal the party's subsequent decision to endorse another candidate. Building on his involvement in local community issues, especially the welfare of returned servicemen, he was in 1925 elected to the Unley City Council.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 45: Jack McLeay.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1200, L41484.

He was mayor of Unley from 1935 to 1937. When he successfully stood for the state seat of Unley in 1938, he chose to do so as an independent. He was defeated at the March 1941 election.

As an alderman of the City of Adelaide (1940–46), and then as lord mayor (1946–50), McLeay's stated approach to politics was a simple but effective one of cultivating friendly personal relations and building trust. He recalled beginning his mayoralty wary of some of the notables he would have to deal with but decided that he 'had to have this job to find out how really human these people are' (*Mail* 1949, 7). On 10 December 1949, standing as an LCL candidate, he won the federal seat of Boothby in south-east suburban Adelaide, a recent redistribution having made it a safe Liberal seat that he was to hold for nearly seventeen years. George, meanwhile, was a senator (1935–47, 1950–55), serving as government whip and leader in the Senate, and as a minister in the Lyons, Page, Fadden, and both Menzies governments.

Despite his status as a parliamentarian, McLeay remained the effective manager of McLeay Bros until 1955. He attracted little controversy as a backbencher, but posthumous attention was paid to his role as chair of the Privileges Committee during the Fitzpatrick–Browne case of 1955, before he became Speaker. This related to the gaoling of a Bankstown newspaper proprietor and one of his contributing journalists for three months at the order of the House following their publication of an allegation that a member had been involved in immigration fraud. Andrew Moore's history of the case suggests that although McLeay had assured Fitzpatrick's legal counsel that the committee would not allow Fitzpatrick to incriminate himself, it failed to actually do so (Moore 2011, 104). It is hard to believe that, as Chairman, McLeay would have knowingly allowed an undertaking to be broken by committee members. Any deliberate attempt by him to mislead would have been totally out of character. The committee had rejected the counsel's plea to accompany Fitzpatrick when he gave evidence (Moore 2011, 103–6). It found that the articles were intended to influence and intimidate the member, and advised the House of a serious breach of privilege and that it should take action accordingly. The subsequent request for counsel to act for Fitzpatrick before the House was refused by the Speaker, Archie Cameron, and the prime minister's motion that the pair were guilty of a serious breach of privilege and should be imprisoned for three months was agreed to on division.

In 1956 Cameron was seriously ill. When a move began within the government parties to draft McLeay as his successor as Speaker, McLeay's response was to warn Cameron. On 9 August, Cameron died. He had been a contentious presiding officer, particularly amongst opposition members who deeply resented his perceived partiality. Speculation as to whom the government would nominate as his replacement initially focused on Percy Joske from Victoria, but nothing came of this. McLeay had a strong claim to the position, given his experience as a Temporary Chairman of Committees, chair of the Privileges Committee, and service on several other House and joint

committees. On 28 August, he was chosen by an overwhelming majority at a joint meeting of the government parties. He was a popular choice; even the hardened press gallery journalist Alan Reid saw McLeay as being rewarded for known qualities of decency and loyalty (Cockburn 1982, 5).

Yet when the ballot in the House took place on 29 August, the opposition proposed Norman Makin, who had been Speaker between 1929 and 1931. This evident legacy of Labor's dissatisfaction with Cameron was the only occasion during McLeay's long service that his election as Speaker was challenged in the House. He quickly established himself as an effective and popular presiding officer, not merely because his calm manner presented such a contrast to that of his tempestuous predecessor. His approach to politics drew on his longstanding sense of sportsmanship and thus of giving opponents a 'fair go'. The veteran South Australian Labor parliamentarian Clyde Cameron later said that, although it was evident that McLeay knew less about the standing orders than any other postwar Speaker of his experience, he brought an important evenness of temperament to the chair (Souter 1988, 438).

Nonetheless, McLeay faced constant difficulties in maintaining the standing of the office of Speaker in the charged political atmosphere of the Cold War and the split in the Labor Party. His success was ultimately based on the fundamental fairness of his rulings, which were unaffected by his decision to attend Liberal Party meetings. He coped well with persistent sniping in the chamber from the turbulent Labor parliamentarian Eddie Ward and, on the government side, the unpredictable Bill Wentworth. McLeay compensated for his limited familiarity with the details of the standing orders by preferring to pragmatically interpret them according to his judgement of the mood of the House. Another tactic was to occasionally introduce a note of levity to lighten the mood of proceedings. He drew laughter by advising ministers not to be afraid of Prime Minister (Sir) Robert Menzies and so to stand closer to their leader when replying to questions to ensure that they could be heard right across the chamber (*Canberra Times* 1965, 4). His office door remained open to any member who wished to discuss an issue.

On 17 February 1959—the first of three occasions that McLeay was re-elected as Speaker—the leader of the opposition, H. V. Evatt, congratulated him on his 'efficiency in the Chair and above all by the spirit of fairness and tolerance that you showed during all the debates' (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1959, 8). Philip Laundry observed in his authoritative history, *The Office of Speaker*, that 'this was no empty tribute. Australian political leaders are not in the habit of paying polite compliments to people who, in their opinion, do not deserve them' (Laundry 1964, 390). From 1958 to 1965, McLeay represented the Australian parliament and government on overseas visits that included Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Papua New Guinea, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. For service to parliament and country, he was appointed KCMG in 1962.

Sir John supported the long-delayed reform of the standing orders. 'Temporary' standing orders, based on those used by the colonial assemblies, had been adopted in 1901 and remained largely unchanged until March 1950, when the first permanent standing orders were adopted. In 1960, the House's Standing Orders Committee commenced a further comprehensive review on which it reported in August 1962. The result the following year was that, of 403 existing standing orders, 101 were altered, sixty omitted, and fifty-nine new or substitute ones added. They included changes in procedures for financial legislation, for the committee stage in the passage of bills, and for questions seeking information. On his retirement, McLeay identified these reforms as a career highlight (*Canberra Times* 1966, 3).

During 1964 McLeay also lent his support to a review of the structure and administrative arrangements for the Department of the House of Representatives. This led to a reorganised and expanded department to meet the growing needs of the parliament and marked the start of a period of growth in its functions (Reid and Forrest 1989, 417–18). McLeay's tact and firmness also featured in his handling of relations with the press. In May 1964, he reacted to a claim by the broadcast journalist Frank Chamberlain that some of his rulings were not properly impartial by summoning Chamberlain before him and obtaining a public retraction (Lloyd 1988, 209–10). The following year, McLeay resolved complaints from the Press Gallery Committee about increasing numbers of unauthorised persons—mostly ministerial staff—entering the press gallery of the chamber, especially during question time. He first became involved in this matter as far back as 1957, when he had the relevant rules tightened but, despite continuing discussion between the committee and the Private Secretaries Association, by 1965 he found it necessary to approve the posting of parliamentary attendants at the gallery entrance to control entry (Reid and Forrest 1989, 448).

When, on 12 November 1964, McLeay equalled the record period of service as Speaker of another South Australian, Sir Frederick Holder, of eight years, seventy-six days, he received congratulations from both sides of the House. Prime Minister Menzies thanked him 'for the uniform good temper with which you have presided over us' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.1964, 2865). Perhaps more tellingly, the leader of the opposition, Arthur Calwell, added that 'had we won one more seat in 1961 [and so formed government], we would have kept you on as Speaker. You know my opposition to the wearing of wigs; I would have waived that objection in order to keep you in office' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.1964, 2865). The veteran Labor member Reg Pollard, who had clashed bitterly with Archie Cameron, claimed to be 'the only honourable member here who has enjoyed the experience of being suspended from the sittings by you. May I say how much I enjoyed it and how richly I deserved it?' (H.R. Deb. 12.11.1964, 2865).

'ORDER, ORDER!'

McLeay retired from parliament on 31 October 1966, after a tenure as Speaker of ten years and two months. Fond of using military terms as descriptors, he duly described his departure from politics as 'retiring to a strategic position' (*Australian* 1966, 4). Press coverage of his retirement succinctly captured his homespun philosophy of how to preside over the House. The *Australian* headlined him as 'the man they could trust' (1966, 4), and the *Canberra Times* quoted him as concluding: 'Provided you umpire the game, and only umpire the game, and don't try to kick goals, all the players will appreciate you' (1966, 3). During his Speakership, McLeay had no censure or want of confidence motions moved against him and only three motions of dissent against his rulings—all of which were unsuccessful. As a mark of the esteem in which he was held by members of the Department of the House of Representatives, staff and their families hosted a retirement dinner for him and his wife at the Hotel Canberra. In Adelaide he resumed his involvement in running McLeay Bros and in community associations such as the Returned Services League and Legacy.

A big man physically as well as in character, McLeay was described by Reid as being 'as Australian as an inland bullocky' and as having set 'a marvellous example of how to handle men with understanding, sympathy and good, earthy Aussie humour' (Cockburn 1982, 5). McLeay died on 22 June 1982 at Ashford following a stroke and a short illness. He was buried in Adelaide's Centennial Park cemetery after a state funeral, survived by two sons and a daughter. His elder son, John, succeeded his father as member for Boothby, becoming a minister in the Fraser government, and Australian consul-general in Los Angeles (1981–83).

Long after McLeay's death, members of the House of Representatives who served during his Speakership still recalled their high regard for him. Gough Whitlam wrote:

I believe that all members of the House respected and liked him. On two or three occasions I spoke or acted inappropriately and he helped me. In my experience and observation the House has not had a better Speaker. By deportment and temperament he was ideal for the post ... Above all, Sir John allowed lively debates. He was a tolerant and good-humoured person but members sensed when he thought they were going too far ... He was an efficient Speaker but not an officious one. (Whitlam, pers. comm.)

Sir Billy Snedden (Speaker, 1976–83), in comparing several of his predecessors, concluded that McLeay was 'the most distinguished of those under whom I served'. McLeay's easy manner was central to his success—the result of 'a raw-boned understanding of what parliament was about' combined with a 'dignity which came from the honesty of the man and his lack of pretence' (Snedden and Schedvin 1990, 215). A portrait by Jack Carrington Smith is held at Parliament House.

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