

# **McLeay, Leo Boyce: Speaker 1989–1993**

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Leo Boyce McLeay, twentieth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born at Marrickville, Sydney, on 4 October 1945, the elder of two children of Ronald Boyce McLeay, a council worker and one-time riveter during construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and his wife, Joan Ann. Leo went to De La Salle College, Marrickville, which he left before obtaining the Leaving Certificate and became a post office telegram boy for a year. In 1962 he became a telephone technician with the Postmaster-General's Department. He attended North Sydney Technical College for further education connected with this job, and was a member of the Postal Telecommunication Technicians' Association and the Federated Clerks' Union.

With his father's encouragement, McLeay joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP), aged thirteen. He was secretary of the Marrickville State Electorate Council of the ALP (1968–73), state secretary of the New South Wales Young Labor Council (1969), and an alderman on Marrickville Council (1971–77). At the invitation of ALP state organiser Graham Richardson, he became a full-time organiser at the party's New South Wales head office (1976) and assistant general secretary of the New South Wales Branch (1976–79). He was known to friends and enemies alike as 'Leaping Leo'—possibly in reference to his agility in political manoeuvring.

On 20 December 1969, McLeay married Janice Delaney, a high school teacher who was also active in the ALP. They have three sons. Previously frustrated in an attempt to contest the state seat of Marrickville, an opportunity for McLeay arose after the death in 1979 of the sitting member for the safe Labor federal seat of Grayndler, Frank Stewart. Despite the support of the party's state office, he had to fight for preselection using his already well-developed political skills. In his first speech to parliament, he stressed traditional Labor values of social welfare and acknowledged his debts to mentors in the New South Wales right-wing faction of the party: John Ducker, Barrie Unsworth, John 'Johnno' Johnson, Graham Richardson, and Paul Keating.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 46: Leo McLeay.**

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

Although recognised as a right-wing heavyweight of the ALP, McLeay entered parliament with a keen awareness of his lack of formal education. Colleagues gently mocked his working-class and occasionally ungrammatical speech. He abandoned a master's course in public administration as a 'waste of time' (Cumming 1991, 321). Instead, parliament itself, especially contact with ministers and fellow members of parliamentary committees, helped fill the educational gap. He served on numerous House and joint standing and select committees, including several relevant to the management of parliamentary business such as Procedure, Publications, Library, Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings, Privileges, and New Parliament House. Others included Public Accounts, Corporations and Securities, and Primary Industries. He also took an interest in international issues, attending the 1981 International Parliamentary Union (IPU) Conference in Havana. In October 1982, he chaired a subcommittee of the House Standing Committee on Expenditure that produced the *In a Home or at Home* report on aged-care accommodation—a significant contribution to this policy field.

With his standing in caucus, McLeay could have aspired to a ministerial position but instead chose a path towards the Speakership. When Joan Child became Speaker in February 1986, he was elected Chairman of Committees. Although loyal to his own party, he felt that the relationship between the executive and the backbench was 'monstrously overweighted' (Hope 1991) in favour of the executive, and he took a keen interest in improving the functioning of parliament. As a member of the House Standing Committee on Procedure, he proposed the reform of question time to make questions brief and each devoted to a single issue, answers relevant, and to ensure that at least sixteen questions were asked at each question time.

When Child retired, McLeay, on 29 August 1989, realised his ambition to be Speaker. He set about attempting to reform the parliamentary and caucus committee systems, and to modernise the House's administration. As a new Speaker, he understandably relied heavily on the advice of the Clerk of the House. Nevertheless, he was critical of some parliamentary staff and used combative language when later describing his relationship with senior parliamentary officers (Redenbach 1999, 285).

During his twenty-five years in parliament, McLeay joined delegations to fifteen countries in Europe, six in the Americas, eight in East Asia and the Middle East, and others in Oceania and Africa. In 1990 he was elected to the executive committee of the IPU for a four-year term. His factional role within the ALP intensified during the turmoil of 1991 as Keating challenged Bob Hawke for the party leadership. McLeay subsequently described his acting as Keating's campaign director within the party as 'probably the worst thing I did as a Speaker' (Redenbach 1999, 220).

The opposition subjected McLeay to strong criticism for not reining in overlong ministerial responses to 'Dorothy Dixier' questions, especially by Prime Minister Keating. On one occasion in March 1991, question time descended into disarray

'ORDER, ORDER!'

in what he described as 'a classic display of rough-house destabilisation' (Loane 1991). On 2 April 1992, he became one of the few Speakers to be the subject of a no-confidence motion. This was moved by the leader of the opposition, John Hewson, amid a barrage of interjections from both sides of the chamber, and was defeated on party lines.

McLeay did not consider himself particularly severe in disciplining opposition members. He saw his strong factional standing as protection against the executive dominating the Speaker:

Well of course Labor Speakers can't be too independent because they'll get it in the neck. I'm not being big-headed but I don't really think anyone's going to give it to me in the neck. (Cumming 1991, 323)

Ultimately, while McLeay at times bowed to political pressures, it is widely recognised that the main challenge facing all Speakers of his era was the aggressive political culture displayed in the typical question time.

McLeay's Speakership was nonetheless also a time of constructive debate on House procedures and attempts at wide-ranging change. In October 1992, the House adopted a significant reform by converting a number of sessional orders—some originating as long before as 1983—into standing orders, and also commenced the process of formally renaming the Chairman of Committees as Deputy Speaker. He supported these changes, especially provisions to strengthen the committee system as 'a way of bringing all members of the legislature into the policy making framework' (H.R. Deb. 15.10.1992, 2312). Additionally, a weekly private members' business session would provide 'a mechanism here every Thursday for Honourable members to air matters which are of importance to them' (H.R. Deb. 15.10.1992, 2312). He hoped that these changes would together 'put a lot of power back into the hands of backbenchers' (H.R. Deb. 15.10.1992, 2312). The Standing Committee on Procedure was very active during his time as Speaker, submitting eleven reports, including one in June 1992 proposing the reform of question time. Yet there was little obvious change in the day-to-day functioning of the House. McLeay summed up the pressures hampering reforms in simple terms: 'the Government did not want them' (Hope 1991). More successfully, he banned smoking in the parliament building.

The main change in House practice during McLeay's Speakership was the advent of television coverage. Cameras had been permitted in the Senate for six months when the House commenced a trial period of broadcasting on 12 February 1991. He supported the trial and found it 'rather extraordinary' that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was intending to broadcast question time not live but at 11.55 at night (H.R. Deb. 12.2.1991, 328). Many members and parliamentary officers were concerned that editing by broadcasters and the expected emphasis on

question time would distort proceedings for viewers. Directions to camera operators issued by the Serjeant-at-Arms were specific, within the context of fair coverage, requiring them to focus on members who were actively involved in a debate.

On 6 June, McLeay reported in brief on this 'interesting and informative experience' (H.R. Deb. 6.6.1991, 4998), from which the House agreed to establish a select committee chaired by the Speaker to fully assess the trial by August that year. The committee's unanimous report, *The Eyes Have It!*, was generally well received by members. On 16 October, the House passed a resolution authorising the broadcast and rebroadcast of proceedings using provisions that broadly implemented the committee's recommendations. This provided a statutory basis for televising House proceedings and the establishment of a standing committee to set guidelines and conditions.

In December 1992, McLeay became embroiled in controversy arising from an incident that had occurred more than two years earlier. On Anzac Day 1990, he had hired a bicycle from the Parliament House gymnasium and was hurt when it collapsed as he rode it through suburban Canberra. He sued the Joint House Department for injuries suffered and, in November 1991, his claim for compensation was settled for \$55,000 including medical costs, plus \$10,000 in legal costs. When this became publicly known, the opposition and the Australian Democrats expressed outrage over the process and the fact that part of the award was based on possible economic loss in employment prospects. Amid this, a highlight of his Speakership came in January 1993 when he led the Australian delegation to the first annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum in Tokyo and was elected to the forum's executive committee.

The attorney-general, Michael Duffy, appointed the eminent jurist Sir Laurence Street to conduct an independent inquiry into McLeay's compensation claim. This was still under way as the 1993 federal election became imminent, and McLeay came under strong pressure from his own party to resign as Speaker so that the issue would not feature in the campaign. On 5 February 1993, he announced his resignation, still steadfastly denying any wrongdoing. A fortnight later, Street found nothing 'which would support the inference that Mr McLeay received favoured treatment in relation to his claim' (Duffy 1993). However, as his own Deputy Speaker, Ron Edwards, suggested, he was perceived to have shown 'a lack of sensitivity towards ordinary Australians struggling during a recession' (Boreham 1993).

Following a redistribution, McLeay stood for the seat of Watson and, immediately after the 1993 election, found his talents put to good use as government whip. This position was upgraded the following year to chief whip. An unexpected interest in this later part of his parliamentary career was national security. He was a member of the joint statutory committee on the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and other intelligence agencies (1999–2004), and of the Joint Select Committee on

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Intelligence Services in 2001. He announced his retirement from parliament shortly before the 2004 election. In his farewell speech, he recalled his committee experience with particular satisfaction: 'The time I spent as chairman of the expenditure committee was one of the great times of my life' (H.R. Deb. 23.6.2004, 31379).

McLeay cut an imposing figure, matched by a ready capacity for blunt speech. This could elicit widely differing reactions, which Neal Blewett encapsulated in noting that, while McLeay possessed the 'characteristic virtues and vices' (Blewett 1999, 84) of the New South Wales right, he also had a strong knowledge of social welfare issues. He retained a sense of his Catholic working-class origins, manifested in his continuing commitment to social justice and the ALP. In retirement, he kept a low public profile. As New South Wales director of the Enhance Group, he offered his experience helping private companies navigate the government procurement system. He also became a director of the Mary MacKillop Foundation. Janice McLeay served as a commissioner for the Industrial Relations Commission of New South Wales (1998–2008). Their son Paul was member for Heathcote in the New South Wales parliament (2003–11) and a minister (2009–10). A portrait by David Thomas is in the Parliament House collection.

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