

# Nehl, Garry Barr: Deputy Speaker 1996–2001

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Garry Owen Barr Nehl, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 19 February 1934 at Newcastle, New South Wales, son of Ivy Nehl, and her husband, William Nehl, moulder, industrial officer, army officer, and later Tobruk veteran. Educated at Sydney Boys' High School (1946–51), where he was a champion rower, he married Suzanne Saul, an art student from St George, Queensland, on 27 January 1956 at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Sydney. Their move to Suzanne's family's grazing property in south-west Queensland marked the start of his enthusiasm for regional Australia. They were to have two sons.

Enterprising and restless, Nehl pursued an eclectic lifestyle in a series of jobs across Australia. He was a member of the Citizen Military Forces (1952–54), an office cadet in Sydney, then a station hand, overseer, and manager at his parents-in-law's property (1956–59), a packaging consultant (1959–61), an administrator in the departments of university extension at the University of New England (1965–68) and the University of Sydney, and an editor and author, becoming proprietor of *Scope* newspaper in Armidale, New South Wales (1968). Despite commencing part-time studies at the University of Sydney in economics, in commerce by correspondence at the University of Queensland, and in arts at the University of New England, he never completed a degree.

Having joined the Country Party in Queensland in 1957, Nehl maintained his membership as he moved about eastern Australia. His first experience of elective office was as an alderman on Armidale City Council (1963–64). He was simultaneously executive officer and secretary of the New England New State Movement (1961–64), which was dedicated to persuading the New South Wales government to excise the state's north-eastern region to form a seventh state of the Australian Commonwealth, reflecting a longstanding contention that the area paid too much tax to a Sydney-based

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'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 49: Garry Nehl.**

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

government for what it received in return. Working with such veteran campaigners as Ulrich Ellis, Nehl hoped that a new state would set the pattern for the entire nation, as ‘unless we are prepared to decentralise government we are never going to get the balanced government we so badly need’ (*Canberra Times* 1967, 13). He ran a branch of the New State movement in Newcastle and chaired the Citizens’ Referendum Council ahead of the referendum on statehood that the New South Wales government conducted on 29 April 1967. While the referendum was defeated, nearly 67 per cent of voters outside the Hunter Valley favoured separation, encouraging Nehl and three others to stand as candidates for the New State Party at the 1968 state election. He gained 35 per cent of the primary vote in the seat of Clarence against a Country Party incumbent but failed to win the seat.

Late in 1968, the peripatetic Nehl moved to Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, where he undertook casual work on local newspapers and sold life insurance. In Melbourne, he managed a migrant hostel (1969–71), then in Sydney was a freelance public relations consultant and a personnel manager with Morganite Australia (1972–76), before returning to Coffs Harbour. In 1976 he established a public relations firm, and authored three photographic books: *The Banana Coast* (1978), *Timbertown* (1978), and *Coffs Harbour: The Natural Growth Centre* (1979). He also edited *Banana Bulletin*, the journal of the New South Wales Banana Growers’ Federation (1980–84). Although the New State movement was fading, Nehl stayed loyal to the separatist cause and was a proud promoter of his current home. As ‘el presidente’ of the ‘Banana Republic’, he publicised the area, visiting New Zealand in 1983 as the republic’s putative foreign minister. More conventionally, he served in a series of positions in the National Party. He was a member of its New South Wales research committee (1980–81), the state Campaign Committee (1980–84), the state Central Council and Central Executive (1980–85), and chaired the Coffs Harbour Electorate Council (1980–85). In 1984 he was the successful National Party candidate for the federal electorate of Cowper, a safe seat extending along northern coastal New South Wales.

In his first speech to the House, Nehl extolled ‘the virtues and wonders’ of Cowper—‘God’s own coastline’ (H.R. Deb. 19.3.1985, 514)—and later dubbed himself the member for paradise. During his seventeen years in parliament, he pursued a strikingly diverse range of interests and causes. These extended from *Otitis media* (‘glue ear’) in Aboriginal communities and iodine deficiency in Tibet, to the issues faced by non-custodial parents, and the Australian Parliamentary Antarctic Alliance. In November 1988, he introduced a private member’s bill to restore tax deductibility for donations to the Reverend Ted Noffs’s Life Education centres. Nehl’s loud interjections in debate were likened to fireworks explosions that had ‘to be heard to be believed’ (Warden 1988).

Nehl sat on numerous parliamentary committees, including Public Accounts; Australian Security Intelligence Organisation; Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade; Industry, Science, and Technology; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Although supportive of the committee system, he became concerned by the pressure it placed on busy backbenchers. The Speaker, he also felt, should be more independent of party politics. He served as the shadow parliamentary secretary to National Party leader Charles Blunt (1989–90) and, in April 1990, stood for the party leadership himself after Blunt lost his seat at the previous month's election. The winner of the leadership ballot, Tim Fischer, appointed Nehl party deputy whip—a post he held for the next six years. He was also Deputy Chair of Committees (1990–94) and a member of the Speaker's panel (1994–96).

On 30 April 1996, at the outset of the Howard government, Nehl was elected Deputy Speaker, defeating the opposition's nominee, Harry Jenkins, a future Speaker. Nehl served in this position for more than five and a half years under Speakers Bob Halverson, Ian Sinclair—whom he had known well when a Country Party member in New England—and Neil Andrew. Immediately after becoming Deputy Speaker, he observed that 'not one person was killed' in the recent change of government—a reflection of Australia being 'so fortunate and so privileged' to be a democracy (H.R. Deb. 30.4.1996, 23). Nehl was particularly keen to impart his deeply felt commitment to parliamentary democracy to the young, and so gave generously of his time to school groups visiting Parliament House. He once drew the attention of members to the parliament's ownership of a 1297 edition of the Magna Carta as evidence of 'an unbroken 700-odd years of growth and development of democracy' (H.R. Deb. 26.6.1997, 6607). But he was also conscious of 'the stresses that are involved' in presiding over the House (H.R. Deb. 13.12.1996, 8628). One of his more difficult experiences was when he suspended a meeting of the Federation Chamber (then known as Main Committee) after the opposition's Wayne Swan 'persisted in disorderly behaviour by continuing to interject after being called to order' (H.R. Deb. 8.2.2001, 24233–34), and subsequently reported the matter to the Speaker so that Swan could be named.

Nehl continued to take a public stance on issues about which he felt strongly. He supported the Northern Territory government's legalisation of euthanasia; despite his personal opposition, he could not concur with 'federal intervention in the lawful activities of a democratic government, a democratic parliamentary assembly of this nation' (H.R. Deb. 5.12.1996, 7934). In 2000 he was dismayed by the implications of the goods and services tax for rent charged to long-term residents of caravan parks, declaring that his integrity was at stake because of a promise the Nationals had made at the previous election.

When Nehl retired from parliament in September 2001, Prime Minister John Howard, in thanking him for his service as Deputy Speaker, affirmed that ‘he has one of the loudest voices that I have encountered in the national parliament in twenty-seven years ... a crowd stopper when there is a really noisy House’ (H.R. Deb. 27.9.2001, 31674). In 2005 the genial Nehl was appointed AM for his services to parliament and his community. He was a member of the Coffs Harbour South-East Asian and Vietnam Veterans’ Association and co-chaired a 2005 review of medal entitlements for Australians who served in Korea after the 1953 armistice. He retained his longstanding interest in upgrading the Pacific Highway, and became a board member of the Royal Freemasons Benevolent Institution that operates aged-care and nursing homes, a patron of the North Coast Cricket Council, and president of the board of the Coffs Harbour Regional Conservatorium. In extolling the virtues of democracy, he once declared that he would be happy if his epitaph were to read simply that ‘he was a parliamentarian’ (H.R. Deb. 5.12.1996, 7933).

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