

Rosevear, John Solomon (Sol): Speaker 1943–1949

Frank Bongiorno

John Solomon (Sol) Rosevear (1892–1953), timber mill machinist, union official, and eleventh Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 4 January 1892 at Pyrmont, Sydney, sixth of seven children of native-born parents William John Rosevear, carter, and his wife, Maria, née McGuirk. His father was an early member of the Labor Party in New South Wales. Educated at Pyrmont Superior Public School, Sol was sufficiently competent to rank third in his sixth-year class (1905). As a young man, he was a capable runner and swimmer, and would serve as honorary secretary of the Pyrmont swimming club.

After leaving school at fourteen, Rosevear began work in a timber mill. A shop steward when he was seventeen, he was, by 1912, on the managing committee of the Sawmill and Timberyards Employees' Union. The following year, he was a delegate to the interstate conference in Hobart that formed the Amalgamated Timber Workers' Union of Australia. In 1914 he lost two fingers while working a planing machine. On 23 September 1916, at St Bartholomew's Anglican Church, Pyrmont, he married Clara May White, a machinist.

Rosevear was a strike committee member in the defeated timberworkers' strike of 1929. He is said to have been blacklisted by employers in its aftermath, but briefly found employment 'running a one-man mill' (Australia House London 1946) before a slump in the building industry led to his dismissal. As secretary of the Leichhardt branch of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) from July 1926, he was involved in litigation the following year over control of the branch's books, which he had refused to give up in the face of a court action arising from new party rules designed to limit the power of the Australian Workers' Union. In August 1927, he failed to gain preselection for the state seat of Leichhardt. He supported the successful candidature of the former Queensland premier Ted Theodore in the by-election for the Sydney federal seat of Dalley in 1927, but proceeded to contest preselection for the same

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Figure 56: Sol Rosevear.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

seat in the general election of November 1928. He went on to serve as Theodore's campaign organiser at the 1928 and 1929 general elections. Rosevear also stood unsuccessfully in the Leichhardt municipal elections of 1925, 1928, and 1931.

In Labor's disastrous election defeat of December 1931, Rosevear contested Dalley for the state Labor Party loyal to Jack Lang. His opponent was his former associate and friend, Theodore, who had the endorsement of the federal ALP. Rosevear easily defeated Theodore and three other candidates. Having suffered unemployment during the Depression—Rosevear did labouring work that included shovelling sand at Maroubra Beach—he promoted an unemployed workers' relief movement. He is said to have successfully applied for further unemployment relief just at the time of his election to parliament (Makin c. 1962). He sat in the House of Representatives with the 'Langites' led by Jack Beasley until they reunited (1936) with the federal ALP. In 1936–37 Rosevear was an executive member of federal caucus. When a further split occurred in 1940, he was elected deputy leader of the ALP (Non-Communist), again under Beasley, although he had agonised over whether or not to join this Langite splinter group.

In parliament Rosevear distinguished himself as a 'clear thinker, with a good financial brain, quick intelligence and strong personality' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1953, 1). Sir Paul Hasluck later recalled that although 'one of the ablest' performers in the House, Rosevear 'showed more interest in the fight' than 'in any theories or principles' (1997, 42). Rosevear's parliamentary colleague Norman Makin described him similarly as 'a devastating critic', but with a capacity for 'constructive thinking' that did not match such verbal aggression (c. 1962). Nor was Rosevear noted for a preparedness to forgive and forget. With other former Langites such as Beasley and Eddie Ward, he kept up a bitter campaign during World War II against Theodore as director-general of Allied Works, although his antipathy did not prevent him from acting as a pallbearer at Theodore's funeral in 1950, representing the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Archie Cameron. Outside parliament, he was usually good-humoured. Rosevear served as a member of the Bankruptcy Legislation Committee (1932–36) and as a Temporary Chairman of Committees (1934–43).

When the Beasley group was finally reconciled with the federal ALP in 1941 and Labor came to power under John Curtin in October that year, many observers believed that Rosevear was unlucky not to secure a post in cabinet. The press gallery journalist Harold Cox judged that his 'intellectual gifts are not equalled by more than a handful of his Caucus colleagues' (Cox 4 December 1947). His omission was probably the result of continuing hostility in caucus to his having aligned himself with the Beasley breakaway group in 1940. Although he was a disgruntled backbencher in the early years of the Curtin government, he was appointed controller of leather and footwear in 1942, and clung tenaciously to the position until 1945. He was also chairman (1944–45) of the Post-war Planning Committee of Leather and Footwear Industries.

Rosevear became Speaker on 22 June 1943, following the resignation of the opposition's Walter Nairn in the lead-up to the election two months later, at which the Curtin government triumphed. He became one of the most controversial Speakers in the history of the office. Few have been so immersed in the internal affairs of their own party while in the role. Although, as his parliamentary colleague Senator Nicholas McKenna said, Rosevear brought to the Speakership 'a new strength and a new power' (S. Deb. 24.3.1953, 1495), he also bore the arts perfected in the hurly-burly of New South Wales Labor politics between the wars. Not all such skills and impulses were well suited to his new role as presiding officer, leading some observers, according to Makin, to consider him temperamentally unsuited to the position.

Symbolically following the ALP practice of refusing both wig and gown, Rosevear gained a reputation for inflexibility in his rulings. Opposition members and journalists regularly accused him of partisanship. Some of his party colleagues concurred; Kim C. Beazley recalled his father observing of Rosevear that

when he was not in the chair and his deputy or one of his assistants was in the chair, Sol would come in and sit on the government front bench and make interventions, speeches and interjections. He regarded himself as a member of the Government and he was rightly there, in his mind, to defend the Government. No nonsense about independent Speakers, he felt, in those days. (Andrew et. al. 2002, 151).

The opposition moved a no-confidence motion in Rosevear in July 1946, with (Sir) Robert Menzies declaring that in his eighteen years of parliamentary experience he had 'never seen such a gratuitous abuse of power on the part of any presiding officer' (H.R. Deb. 26.7.1946, 3198). The Country Party leader, (Sir) Arthur Fadden, complained that 'if the umpire wears the blazer of one of the competing teams it makes it more difficult for members of the other team to accept his rulings with confidence' (H.R. Deb. 26.7.1946, 3202). But Rosevear also managed to annoy government backbenchers with his insistence that they inform him of any questions they intended to direct to ministers. 'He snaps like an angry bear at Back Benchers like Duthie, and O'Connor, but allows Ministers all sorts of latitude', a political newsletter reported late in 1947 (*Things I Hear* 1947, 3).

When the House was in committee during the budget debate in November 1946, Rosevear launched a ferocious tirade against his former ally Lang. Fred Daly, then a young Labor parliamentarian, recalled it 'as one of the most vitriolic and devastating attacks I have heard made on any individual in Parliament' (Daly 1984, 56); another colleague, Les Haylen, thought that this 'biting and terrible speech' was like 'hungry huskies in the Arctic Circle eating their fallen comrade in the traces so that the remainder could survive' (Haylen 1969, 61). Rosevear said:

The honourable member for Reid [Lang] was my friend. He would still be my friend politically if he was still in the Labour movement, but he is now no more a friend of mine politically than the right honourable member for North Sydney (Mr. Hughes) who ratted on the Labor party in 1916. I say pointedly to the honourable member for Reid that on a thousand occasions I have heard him proclaim from the public platform and at Labour conferences that if ever the day came when the press of this country lauded him and featured him and the Opposition applauded him, he would no longer be a Labour man. I ask him to look around at his newfound friends. (H.R. Deb. 26.11.1946, 576)

The following year Rosevear made public attacks against judges of the High Court of Australia, arising from the court's August 1947 decision invalidating section 48 of the Banking Act 1945 that required state governments and authorities to transfer their accounts with private banks to the Commonwealth Bank or to state banks. In November, when the House was in committee to examine the details of the Banking Bill 1947 on bank nationalisation, and the Chairman of Committees, Joseph Clark, was presiding, Rosevear told the House that 'men should not be maintained on the High Court of Australia when they reach the stage of life at which they must suffer obvious incapacity' (H.R. Deb. 13.11.1947, 2071). (Sir) John McEwen of the Country Party declared Rosevear's attack to be 'the most dangerous and most menacing speech' he had heard during his time in the parliament (H.R. Deb. 13.11.1947, 2072). Rosevear was characteristically unrepentant, maintaining his 'fundamental objection to people in a state of senility' being able to 'frustrate the will of the people' (H.R. Deb. 13.11.1947, 2071).

While enjoying all of the perquisites to which his high office entitled him, Rosevear continued to play an influential role in caucus. He ran Ward's unsuccessful campaign against Herbert Vere Evatt for the deputy leadership of the federal ALP in 1946, but soon fell out with Ward over the latter's support for striking wharfies and the powers of the Stevedoring Industry Commission to suspend the registration of surplus waterside workers. Some believed that by this time he had grown tired of the Speakership as a 'backwater from which he wishes to escape' (Cox 24 March 1947). Cynics interpreted his apparent drift to the right, and his spearheading of a movement for improved payments and facilities for politicians, as part of a bid for future leadership of the party. He was the moving force in a £500 per annum increase in salaries in 1947—achieved in the face of opposition from the parsimonious prime minister and treasurer, Ben Chifley. Some commentators took seriously Rosevear's hope of succeeding Chifley, and noted his increasingly hostile relations with Evatt, who harboured similar ambitions (Cox, 24 March 1947).

A number of backbenchers, however, while admiring Rosevear's intelligence and debating skills, were unimpressed by his attacks on the High Court and were concerned about the impact of his obvious partisanship on radio listeners to parliament. Some also regarded 'his taste for grog' as a severe barrier to leadership:

Rosevear was said to keep 'a particularly well stocked cupboard in his quarters' (Cox, 24 March 1947). On one occasion, while he was 'entertaining two young Canberra matrons to quiet drinks', a child managed to climb out of a window and fall to the lawn below, albeit without suffering evident harm (Cox, 31 March 1947). Another time, fellow ex-timber worker and Labor parliamentarian Jim Hadley severely injured a leg 'after a recent session with Mr Speaker' (Cox, 31 March 1947). Allegedly, the Speaker was even 'frequently quite drunk in the Chair', but had 'an amazing gift for concealing his condition' (Cox, 31 March 1947). He was also said to have permitted, and participated in, illegal gambling in the parliament on a grand scale (Cox, 27 February 1950).

In 1948 Rosevear led the Australian delegation to the Empire Parliamentary Association conference, held in London. Following his return, he curtailed his official activities due to illness, and was twice admitted to hospital in 1949. He was a vigorous opponent in caucus of the Chifley government's expansion of the size of parliament for the 1949 election to match population increases since Federation, and the introduction of proportional voting in the Senate. Rosevear argued that these measures would not improve the quality of representation, were not justified when members had access to more office staff to cope with increased workloads, and, not least, would work against the ALP.

Although at the election Rosevear held his safe seat with ease, he lost the Speakership as the Chifley government was swept from office. He died of a coronary occlusion on 21 March 1953 in Lewisham Private Hospital, Sydney; his wife and their son and daughter survived him. His funeral service was held at All Souls' Church of England in Leichhardt. According to Hasluck, when the clergyman presiding described Rosevear as a 'great national leader and statesman', a 'devout Christian', and a 'highly moral character', Daly remarked audibly: 'By God, we're burying the wrong man' (1997, 43). But Fadden still thought him 'a most congenial man' and 'always good company' (H.R. Deb. 24.3.1953, 1499). A portrait of Rosevear by Joshua Smith, which won the Archibald Prize in 1944, is held by Parliament House.

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