

# Scholes, Gordon Glen: Speaker 1975

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Gordon Glen Denton Scholes (1931–2018), train driver, trade unionist, and sixteenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 7 June 1931 at West Melbourne, only child of Melbourne-born Thomas Glen Denton Scholes, railway worker, and his wife, Mary Louisa, née O'Brien, a psychiatric nurse. Gordon's parents were Labor voters and nominally Catholic. Although he had his first communion and attended Catholic primary schools—'that was a must' (Scholes 2010)—he was later to marry into the Church of England. His childhood was marked by ill health, loneliness, and disruption as his father's job took them around Victoria. A car accident when he was three led to months of recurrent hospitalisation with pneumonia, rheumatic fever, and resultant heart weakness. He was held in isolation at the Melbourne Hospital for Sick Children, with not even his parents allowed to visit.

Childhood insecurity was exacerbated by World War II, which irrevocably rent Scholes's family. His father enlisted in December 1941 and served in New Guinea, while his mother worked in the munitions factory at Maribyrnong. He turned fourteen in the children's hospital's Mt Eliza campus, again suffering from rheumatic fever. Thomas Scholes had left Melbourne as a champion country footballer and cricketer, but he returned in December 1945 with a bullet wound in the back of his head, ravaged by malaria, and alcohol dependent. A long-term patient at Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, he 'virtually never came back from the war as far as we were concerned' (Scholes 2010). His son became a lifelong teetotaler, non-smoker, and pacifist.

While his mother worked to support the family, Scholes stayed with various relatives. In all, he estimated that he attended twelve different schools across Victoria. A turning point came with the family's move to Daylesford, where his mother worked in her aunt's hotels and he finished his secondary schooling at Daylesford Technical High School, aged fifteen. He began his working life at the Daylesford Woollen Mills and attended night school at the Ballarat School of Mines to qualify as a fitter and turner, hoping to join the railways as his father, grandfather, and uncle had done before him.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 58: Gordon Scholes.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K21/4/75/3.

He had always enjoyed the spectacle of boxing and, while living with his grandparents at Brunswick, attended bouts at the West Melbourne Stadium. At Ballarat he trained at Johnny White's gym and proved to be a natural: he was quick, bullocky, and had surprising endurance for a young man with a leaky heart valve. Scholes's attention was drawn to the tragic impact of the White Australia policy on the African-American boxer Clarence Reeves, 'the Alabama Kid', who was incarcerated and deported in 1948 despite having an Australian wife and children. The headlines that his case generated drew the sympathy of the young Scholes—'my first interest, I suppose, in politics' (Scholes 2010). In 1949, despite his limited experience in the ring, he became amateur heavyweight champion of Victoria, as the Canberra press gallery would later rarely fail to note.

Scholes worked for the railways initially as a cleaner and fireman, but he aimed to qualify as an engine driver, as had the former Labor leader Ben Chifley, whom he considered 'a legend' (Scholes 2010). He was thrilled to serve as a fireman on the great coal-fired engine the Spirit of Progress between Melbourne and Sydney, and successfully sat for his driver's certificate at Wodonga. A member of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) since joining the railways, he also joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP), in 1954. After moving to Geelong, he became AFULE delegate to the Geelong Trades Hall. Not long after, he met the English-born Della Robinson, who was working as a secretary at the nearby Avalon airfield. They married in 1957 at Geelong's Christ Church and had two daughters. Scholes was determined that his own children would have a better childhood than he had, and theirs was a close family. When he was working, his daughters would listen excitedly for their special sign of nine blasts on the train's whistle, signalling that he was on his way home.

In 1962 Scholes was elected president of the Geelong branch of the ALP—a position he occupied for the next two years. The local federal seat of Corio had been held since 1949 for the Liberal Party by the former champion cyclist (Sir) Hubert Opperman, who virtually 'owned the place' (Scholes 2010). Corio received a shake-up at the 1963 election when the charismatic young union leader Bob Hawke ran for the ALP, drawing large crowds. Although Hawke lost, he changed the dynamics of a seat long seen as safe Liberal. Scholes's role as Hawke's campaign manager added to his growing local profile.

Having been drawn to politics 'by the opportunity to make life better for the people he worked alongside and their families' (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2019, 13000), it was fitting that Scholes's own first run at political office arose from the threatened closure of his daughters' kindergarten. He chaired the parents' committee that successfully challenged this and, in 1965, was elected a Geelong city councillor and president of Geelong Trades Hall. The following year, he was preselected by the ALP as its new candidate for Corio, but at the federal election of October 1966, the party suffered

a major defeat nationally and, in Corio, a 6 per cent swing against it in the primary vote. Political hubris led to a rerun after Prime Minister Harold Holt announced Opperman's appointment as high commissioner to Malta just two months after the election, leaving Corio vacant and its voters unimpressed. At the July 1967 by-election, Scholes took the seat with an 11 per cent swing in the primary vote.

Scholes's win was Gough Whitlam's first electoral success since becoming opposition leader five months earlier. Whitlam had campaigned heavily in Corio, without which Scholes believed he would not have succeeded. His first speech to the House of Representatives was long and powerful, focused on 'people in this country who have very little in the way of liberties, either economically or otherwise' (H.R. Deb. 29.8.1967, 538). He called on the government to increase commitments to health, the manufacturing industry, and social services, to restore the economic and political rights of Indigenous people, and, with a nod to his father's experience, to provide greater support for returning servicemen and women. Underpinning these concerns was Scholes's faith in parliament as the preeminent democratic institution. He also urged members to lift their standard of parliamentary debate, warning that they would not receive the public's respect 'while members of the Parliament treat this institution with the contempt which I suggest some members have for it' (H.R. Deb. 29.8.1967, 542). He soon found working life in Parliament House difficult, especially the long weeks away from his family. At the 1969 election, he increased his primary vote by a further 8 per cent. Lacking the seniority and factional support to press for a shadow ministry, he focused on parliamentary procedural matters, having 'always had some feeling for procedure ... I knew the nuances of it' (Scholes 2010). He joined the House Standing Orders Committee in 1969 and became Deputy Chairman of Committees the following year.

After leading Labor to national office in 1972 for the first time in twenty-three years, Whitlam reflected that the path to this success had 'started in Corio' (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2019, 13000). Scholes nominated for the Speakership, as did his colleague Jim Cope, and, on 28 February 1973, Cope became Speaker with Scholes as Chairman of Committees. These proved to be among the most difficult positions in the new parliament as the Liberal and Country parties—unfamiliar with being in opposition—made clear their intention to disrupt the government at every opportunity. Whitlam's re-election at the May 1974 double dissolution only intensified their determination, and increasingly Cope struggled to control the House and retain the support of his own party. During a particularly torrid parliamentary day, 27 February 1975, Whitlam led Labor members in voting against a motion to suspend Clyde Cameron following his being named by Cope, with the result that Cope announced that he would tender his resignation to the governor-general and asked Scholes to take the chair as Deputy Speaker. That evening, Scholes formally became Speaker following a vote in the House conducted along party lines: Scholes defeated the opposition's

candidate, 64 votes to 58 (VP 1974–75/509, 27.2.1975). He had left the chamber during the vote on the suspension of Cameron, as did a number of other government members (VP 1974–75/502–3, 27.2.1975).

It could scarcely have been a more difficult elevation for Scholes, who, at forty-three years of age, was the youngest Speaker of the House since Norman Makin in 1929. On his first full day in the office, he gave a press conference—unusually for a Speaker. The press noted his reserved manner but also his ‘instant judgment on every word and meaning precisely what he said’ (Davidson 1975), along with his call for wider disciplinary powers. Having witnessed the difficulties facing his immediate predecessor, he aimed never to be hampered by indecision or apparent weakness. He worked on projecting his voice and used his commanding physical presence and knowledge of parliamentary procedure to control a fractious House.

Scholes’s quiet authority faced its greatest test during the four weeks from 16 October 1975 when opposition senators refused to consider the government’s supply bills, putting pressure on the prime minister to call an election. On 11 November 1975, Whitlam arrived at Government House at Yarralumla for a 1 p.m. meeting with the governor-general, Sir John Kerr, expecting to finalise arrangements for a half-Senate election. As Whitlam entered Kerr’s study, the governor-general handed him a letter dismissing him and his ministry, and advising that the leader of the opposition, Malcolm Fraser, would be commissioned to form a caretaker government pending an election.

Whitlam’s dismissal resulted in Scholes presiding over the most tumultuous session in the history of the House of Representatives, during which basic assumptions concerning the formation of government were upended. The House resumed at 2 p.m. with Labor Party members, now in opposition, still occupying the government benches while the appointed Fraser-led government sat on the opposition benches. This incongruous situation was further confused by Labor members, including Whitlam, at first being unaware that Fraser had already been commissioned by Kerr as prime minister, having been secreted in an anteroom at Yarralumla when Whitlam was dismissed. At 2.34 p.m. Fraser announced his commissioning and sought to adjourn the House. Scholes remained calm throughout but was initially uncertain whether to instruct Labor members to move to the other side of the House. He allowed them to stay on the government benches—an indication of his commitment to the House’s primacy in determining the party of government.

Fraser failed to force an immediate adjournment and was defeated on several motions, culminating in a no-confidence motion calling on the governor-general to recommission a government led by Whitlam, which was passed by ten votes. When the sitting was suspended at 3.15 p.m., Scholes immediately attempted to contact Government House; ‘as Speaker I was going to ... personally deliver to the

governor-general the opinion of the House' (Scholes 2010). The governor-general's official secretary, (Sir) David Smith, refused Scholes an appointment, and it was only when Scholes told Smith that he intended to recall the House if Kerr refused to see him that an appointment was made for 4.25 p.m. Scholes believed that Kerr had agreed to receive the no-confidence motion, later recalling that 'we were acting on the assumption that the governor-general would do what we thought was right' (Scholes 2010). He arrived at Yarralumla at 4.25 p.m. to find the gates locked. As he waited outside, Kerr and Fraser were inside signing the proclamation to dissolve both houses. Scholes finally entered the gates as Smith was driving out, heading for Parliament House with the signed proclamation. When Scholes handed the motion of the House to the governor-general, Kerr told him that he had already dissolved parliament. Scholes was shocked: 'the governor-general refused to accept the last resolution passed by the parliament, which was a confidence vote' (Scholes 2010).

Despite the dismissal of his party colleagues from office, Scholes remained Speaker—the Speakership being determined by the House of Representatives alone. The day following the dismissal, he wrote to the Queen pointing to 'the danger to our parliamentary system' of a prime minister 'imposed on the nation by Royal prerogative rather than through parliamentary endorsement' (NAA A1209). Scholes described Kerr's delay in seeing him as 'an act of contempt for the House of Representatives' and called on the Queen to restore the Whitlam government 'in accordance with the expressed resolution of the House' (NAA A1209). The Queen's private secretary replied succinctly that: 'The only person competent to commission an Australian Prime Minister is the Governor-General, and The Queen has no part in the decisions which the Governor-General must take in accordance with the Constitution' (WhitlamDismissal.com).

As Speaker, Scholes used his title and personal influence as best he could during the bitter election campaign that followed. The ALP was defeated in a landslide and he survived in Corio by a mere twenty votes after the distribution of preferences. Although deeply troubled by Kerr's actions, Scholes found that they had also strengthened his 'unshakeable belief in the Westminster system' (Blazey 1983). In opposition, he was manager of opposition business in the House (1976–77) and held the shadow portfolios of post and telecommunications, primary industry, defence, and Australian Capital Territory, but was 'never an outspoken or particularly noticeable "shadow minister"' (Longhurst 1984).

With the election of the Hawke government in March 1983, Scholes was elevated to cabinet as minister for defence. The decision to scrap and not replace the ageing aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* was unpopular with a defence establishment that was likened at the time to a 'seething, rancorous, tradition-minded and authoritarian ant-hill' (Blazey 1983). The press increasingly focused on his understated performances

in the House, and, in December 1984, he was dropped from cabinet and became minister for territories. He held this portfolio until July 1987, during which he was instrumental in securing self-government for the Australian Capital Territory and in managing work on the new Parliament House.

In 1993 Scholes retired from politics after twenty-six years as the member for Corio. He remained active in his community, played golf, and revived his interest in stamp collecting as a longstanding member of the Geelong Philatelic Society. In 1993 he was appointed AO, and he received a Centenary Medal in 2001. Scholes died at Geelong on 9 December 2018. He was remembered by his many local friends as a ‘generous and gentle man’ (Geelong Philatelic Society) and was recalled as a Speaker who ‘held true to his duty’ during an unprecedented time ‘when so many acted without scruple’ (H.R. Deb. 12.2.2019, 13000). His wife and daughters survived him. The portrait by Brian Dunlop that hangs in Parliament House depicts Scholes in a characteristically informal pose.

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'ORDER, ORDER!'

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