

Scott, Bruce Craig: Deputy Speaker 2012–2016

Brian F. Stevenson

Bruce Craig Scott, grazier and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 20 October 1943 at Roma, Queensland, one of three sons of Sydney-born John Malcolm Scott, bank officer and grazier, and his Queensland-born wife, Betty Isobel. He was educated at Roma, where the rugby league legend Arthur Beetson was a schoolmate, at Muckadilla State School, and the Anglican Church Grammar School in Brisbane. As a child, Bruce suffered from polio, from which it took many years to recover and necessitated his learning to walk again.

‘Growing up on the land and listening to my parents’ (Scott, pers. comm.), Scott gravitated to what was then the Country Party. He joined the Young Country Party (YCP) in 1962, remembering it as ‘probably more of a social club in those days, but we had a lot of fun’ (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4432). The YCP also had its serious side: at monthly meetings, members debated issues of concern, and local Country Party parliamentarians would attend at least one meeting annually to explain policies and parliamentary processes. From these experiences, Scott developed an early interest in debate and meeting procedures. In 1967 he married Joan Hulbert; they had three children.

Scott became a sheep and wool producer, and a grain grower. In 1983 he was awarded an Australian Nuffield Farming Scholarship, which enabled producers to travel overseas and study an agricultural topic of their choosing. This was ‘a life-changing experience’ that ‘enabled me to look outside of my own community at the global opportunities that were presenting themselves’ (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4427). He studied wool and meat production in the United Kingdom and Europe, and developed an interest in conservation farming, involving minimal tillage of the soil. After his return, he became active in agricultural politics, and went on to serve as president of the Queensland Merino Stud Sheepbreeders’ Association (1983–86), the Maranoa Graziers’ Association (1987–90), and the Australian Association of Stud Merino Breeders (1989–91).

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Figure 59: Bruce Scott.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

In 1989 Scott successfully mounted a preselection challenge to the sitting National Party member for the federal seat of Maranoa, and proceeded at the election of March 1990 to win this vast seat, which covered one-third of Queensland. Maranoa had been in conservative hands since 1943 and, during his incumbency, it remained one of the party's safest seats. As a new member, he valued the advice on procedure and standing orders he received from Ian Sinclair, the long-serving member for New England and a future Speaker.

In his first speech to the House, Scott called for government grants to help victims within his electorate of the Charleville floods, warning that without this 'history will record 21 April 1990 as the day Charleville became Australia's Pompeii' (H.R. Deb. 10.5.1990, 330). He reminded the House that 'decentralisation of our population is a must if we are to continue to have a productive rurally based economy' (H.R. Deb. 10.5.1990, 330), and advocated joint ventures for processing the raw outputs of mining and agriculture as key to Australia's future. In opposition for the first two terms of his career, Scott was quick to earn a place in the shadow cabinet, serving in several portfolios concurrently: shadow minister for rural and regional development (1992–94), shadow assistant minister for primary industry (1992–94), shadow minister for local government (1994–96), and shadow assistant minister for primary industry and rural matters (1994–96).

When the Howard coalition government was elected in March 1996, Scott was awarded the veterans' affairs portfolio, which he held until November 2001. From October 1998 until November 2001, he also served as the minister assisting the minister for defence. Veterans' affairs provided him with, he later estimated, responsibility for 350,000 entitled veterans. He recalled:

I never saw myself as the Minister for Veteran's Affairs but rather as the veterans' minister because it was their voice that I needed to bring to cabinet to make sure that we were, as we often said, looking after the veterans. (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4430)

He later added that representing veterans, war widows, and legatees was 'a personal honour' (Scott, pers. comm.).

In this emotionally demanding portfolio, Scott dealt with the early days of recognition that post-traumatic stress disorder can be war related, and also with the privatisation of veterans' hospitals, effectively switching the government's role from that of service provider to service purchaser. As minister, he visited Commonwealth war graves around the world, and talked to survivors of both World Wars and other conflicts. He made what he considered pilgrimages to Hellfire Pass in Thailand, Sandakan in Sabah, eastern Malaysia, and Long Tan in Vietnam—all places where Australian military personnel had lost their lives. The legendary army nurse Vivian

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Bullwinkel suggested to him a memorial commemorating service nurses on Anzac Parade in Canberra. The new memorial was dedicated in 1999, and the following year a memorial to Australian participants in the Korean War was also dedicated on Anzac Parade. Other new memorials on the Western Front and in Asia helped ensure that the deeds of Australian defence force personnel there would not be forgotten. In Turkey, Scott obtained approval from its government to establish a new site for the Gallipoli dawn service, commencing from 2000.

At home, Scott realised that Remembrance Day was no longer being commemorated by the flying of flags at half-mast, and successfully requested that the governor-general, Sir William Deane, issue an order for the restoration of this custom. As a Centenary of Federation project, Scott also commissioned the digitisation of the 350,000 paper files on World War I veterans, rendering them readily available to families and ensuring that their valuable information would not be lost.

The loss of three seats by the National Party at the federal election of November 2001 changed the ratio of members to ministers among the coalition partners, and Scott was dropped from the new ministry. He served as a member of the Speaker's panel (2002–08) and as Second Deputy Speaker (2008–12), as well as being president of the state branch of the Nationals (2005–06). In September 2010, he was nominated by the opposition for the Deputy Speakership, but the Labor government instead successfully nominated dissident Liberal Peter Slipper for the position. Years later, he recalled this episode as 'such a disappointment' (Scott, pers. comm.).

Scott had to wait until October 2012, when Slipper, now Speaker, resigned and was replaced by the Deputy Speaker, Labor's Anna Burke, creating a vacancy that Scott filled. His nomination was seconded by the independent member Tony Windsor, and his election was greeted by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, praising him as 'one of the gentlemen in this parliament' (H.R. Deb. 9.10.2012, 11668). As Deputy Speaker, he would regularly 'discuss frankly the procedures of the day' with Burke, without their opposing political philosophies intruding, and even finding her 'a delightful person to work with' (Scott, pers. comm.). He felt greatly honoured whenever she asked him to open the parliamentary day and to adjourn the House, including ensuring the return of the mace to the Speaker's office. After the election of the Abbott coalition government in September 2013, he was Deputy Speaker to the Liberals' Bronwyn Bishop.

As Deputy Speaker, Scott presided over sittings of the Federation Chamber, established in 1994 as an alternative venue to the chamber of the House for debate on a restricted range of business. He later explained that 'as a second chamber I wanted it to operate not as a committee but as an extension of the House of Representatives for debate'

(Scott, pers. comm.). The chair's desk was elevated to place its occupant in better view of the members, but, importantly, he ensured that it remained lower than that of the Speaker in the House of Representatives, whose primacy he recognised.

Presiding in the chair required Scott to maintain 'full attention as a point of order could arise very abruptly' (Scott, pers. comm.). He was particularly alert to unparliamentary language or members reflecting adversely on their parliamentary colleagues. The independent member for Kennedy, Bob Katter, occasionally challenged him when reminded not to stray from the topic being debated. Scott was the Australian delegate to the 2015 celebrations in London marking the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta.

In August 2015, Scott announced his intention to resign from parliament to pursue other interests and spend more time with his family. He summarised his achievements in Maranoa:

I have proudly taken the fight of my constituents to the floor of the Federal Parliament, representing them in times of great triumph and despair ... I have fought for better agricultural, health and education outcomes and to improve the local telecommunications and transport networks across the electorate (Arthur 2015).

Scott's valedictory speech was greeted with praise from both sides. Jim Chalmers, the Labor member for Rankin, called him 'a terrific bloke' and reflected on 'what a class act the member for Maranoa is' (H.R. Deb. 4.5.2016, 4434).

In retirement, Scott made good use of his experience by joining several rural boards. These included appointment in 2016 to the Royal Flying Doctor Service board and to the board of the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre at Longreach, Queensland. In 2003 he was awarded a Centenary Medal and in 2000 was appointed a Commandeur de l'Ordre de la Couronne for his contribution to Australian relations with Belgium. In June 2020, he was appointed AM.

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