

Sinclair, Ian McCahon: Speaker 1998

Tracey Arklay

Ian McCahon Sinclair, grazier and twenty-third Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 10 June 1929 in Sydney, only child of George McCahon Sinclair, chartered accountant, and his wife, Gertrude Hazel, a teacher, both Victorian-born. Ian won a scholarship to Knox Grammar School in Sydney, where he became school captain, and then studied at the University of Sydney (BA, 1949; LLB, 1952). He served as a pilot in the Citizen Air Force (1948–52) and was admitted to the Bar in 1952.

Despite his urban background, Sinclair gravitated to the Country Party rather than the Liberals. This reflected his keen interest in farming, arising from his father's grazing business and property at Bendemeer in the New England region of New South Wales. He was appointed managing director of the Sinclair Pastoral Company in 1953. The same year, he moved to New England, where he honed his knowledge of livestock industries, including by serving as a director of the Farmers and Graziers' Co-operative Ltd (1962–65). On 11 February 1956 in Sydney, he married Margaret Anne Tarrant, a journalist, at St David's Church, Lindfield.

In 1961 Sinclair was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Council but in 1963 transferred to the federal arena by successfully standing for the seat of New England. He was appointed minister for social services two years later, and held the portfolio for the next three years. His rapid elevation was supported by the leader of the Country Party, (Sir) John McEwen, who in December 1966 appointed Sinclair minister assisting in his own trade and industry portfolio. The first two decades of his federal career were mostly good ones for the Country Party in which it maintained its strength in the coalition with the Liberals. He gained senior ministerial experience in the Gorton, McMahon, and Fraser governments across the portfolios of shipping and transport, primary industry, special trade representations, communications, and defence. Although passed over for the party's deputy leadership in 1966 in favour

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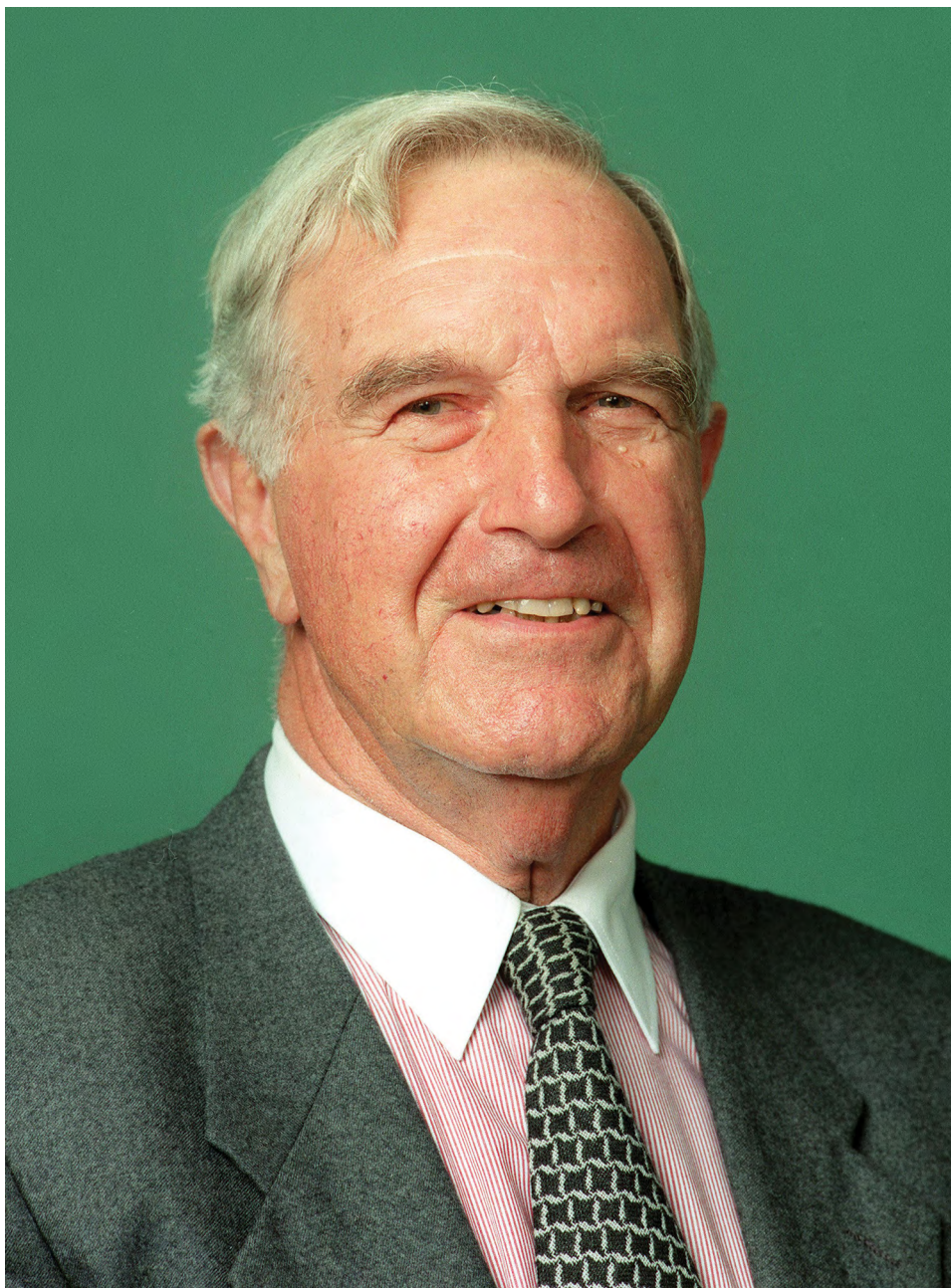


Figure 60: Ian Sinclair.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

of Doug Anthony, he became deputy leader when Anthony was elevated to the leadership five years later, and was twice leader of the House (1976–79, 1980–82). In 1977 he was appointed a member of the Privy Council.

As a highly experienced and trusted member of successive leadership teams, Sinclair, with Anthony and Peter Nixon, formed a triumvirate in the Fraser government dubbed ‘the Mulga Mafia’. They were an assertive and sometimes combative presence in the House, and a significant influence on the government’s policy agenda. Sinclair also became known for his capacity to recover from significant career setbacks. In 1979 he was charged with numerous offences under the Companies Act and was temporarily suspended from the front bench, but he returned to the ministry after being acquitted of all charges. On Anthony’s retirement in January 1984, he finally became leader of what, since October 1982, has been called the National Party. Sinclair was eventually ‘rolled’ by his own party room in May 1989 in a dual coup prompted by the ‘Joh for PM’ campaign that had divided the party and weakened his authority.

By the advent of the government of John Howard in March 1996, Sinclair had recovered to acquire an elder statesman status, which contributed to and gained from his late-career elevation to the Speakership. He was the new prime minister’s favoured candidate, but the Liberal party room insisted on one of its own, Bob Halverson, despite a widely held view that Sinclair ‘knows parliamentary procedure and practice like nobody else in politics’ (Ramsey 1996). His performance in February 1998 as chair of the Constitutional Convention grappling with the issue of an Australian republic was a very public demonstration of his skills. Following Halverson’s resignation, Sinclair agreed to Howard’s request that he become Speaker, thereby putting an end to reports that he was to become high commissioner in London. He was elected on 4 March 1998, making him the first Speaker to come from the junior party in a conservative coalition. In the words of opposition leader Kim Beazley—reminiscent of comments about such past Speakers as Archie Cameron—Sinclair was a poacher ‘now placed in the position of the gamekeeper’ (H.R. Deb. 4.3.1998, 358). Significantly, Beazley also said that ‘we respect you as a warhorse, as a political figure, as a great survivor, as a person with an encyclopaedic knowledge, as a person who treats this chamber seriously and as a worthy and savage opponent’ (H.R. Deb. 4.3.1998, 357).

Sinclair held the Speakership when the House of Representatives—always known for its adversarial atmosphere—was dealing with an array of polarising issues: the High Court’s Wik decision on native title, the fragmentation of the conservative vote by Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, significant changes to the taxation system, waterfront reform, and the privatisation of Telstra and of unemployment services. Added to this, the Labor opposition was still adjusting to being out of government after thirteen years in office. The outcome was an unruly parliament, fuelling criticism by party colleagues that Halverson was too lenient on opposition members. Sinclair, given

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his background as a formidable parliamentary tactician and robust debater, quickly established himself as an assertive Speaker. Yet there were times when he seemed to tire of the more unedifying aspects of adversarial politics, reflecting early in his tenure that 'the chair is not responsible for the views expressed by members of this place—thank goodness' (H.R. Deb. 26.3.1998, 1727). He was also a champion of the work of House committees.

Tradition was important to Sinclair, making him a firm believer in the symbolic importance of parliament and of the role of the Speaker. He combined this with a desire to support the House as a practical and robust chamber that encouraged debate. Physical changes that he instituted were, in part, motivated by nostalgia for the intimacy of the previous parliament building, with the Speaker's chair being moved closer to the central table and seats for visiting guests placed on the main floor. He also rearranged the national flags and the seating of *Hansard* staff so they could better hear proceedings. Increasing use of mobile phones prompted his concern to 'contain non-essential office and electorate activity from interrupting House business' (Sinclair, pers. comm.).

As an arbiter of debate, Sinclair was neither entirely neutral nor simply a government tool. While his personal sympathies were with the government, he insisted that ministers keep answers to questions brief and relevant, and he felt that they made too much use of (then) standing order 321, which allowed them on confidentiality grounds to avoid tabling documents from which they had quoted. Supplementary questions to ministers, which Halverson had controversially permitted, were not allowed. Sinclair ruled against unparliamentary language, reminded members to address their comments through the chair, and rebuked members on both sides of the House when they interjected excessively. He was alert to potential abuses of parliamentary privilege, warning that 'members will recognise ... that whatever its merits such a procedure cannot undo nor negate the harm that may be done by the careless or cavalier use of the privilege of freedom of speech with all the publicity that may sometimes flow from that' (H.R. Deb. 23.3.1998, 1255). Less seriously, soon after becoming Speaker, he informed the House of his awareness of a jar of petty cash dubbed 'Sinker's fund'—a play on his nickname—organised by some opposition members as a prize for the first of their number to be removed from the chamber by the new Speaker. He drolly decreed that, as such an award might well raise criminal and constitutional issues, organisers 'might like to donate the funds to a suitable charity' (H.R. Deb. 30.3.1998, 1836).

Sinclair's rulings, though, were on occasion controversial, drawing criticism from the opposition and some sections of the media. At times he allowed the government considerable latitude and was combative towards Labor. This was especially evident during the waterfront dispute, when he allowed the prime minister great latitude in answering questions. He quashed an opposition attempt to amend a motion moved

by the minister for workplace relations and small business, Peter Reith, supporting waterfront reform, ruling that the House's having suspended standing orders so that this motion could be moved without debate also precluded the opposition from moving an amendment to it (H.R. Deb. 8.4.1998, 2801–11). Yet he tried, if at times imperfectly, to preside fairly while dealing with a particularly fractious House.

On 31 August 1998, Sinclair retired from parliament and the Speakership after just six months in the position, so as to coincide with the forthcoming 1998 election. He was warmly farewelled by both major-party leaders. Prime Minister Howard told the House that Sinclair 'was not only the father of the House by dint of being the longest-serving member but also the father of the House in that he knew its nature, its workings and its rules. He understood its moods and he knew how to relate to it and deal with it like few other men and women who have been here—or, indeed are likely to be here—would be able to do' (H.R. Deb. 10.11.1998, 30).

Sinclair's first wife died of a brain tumour in 1967. In 1970, he married Rosemary Edna Fenton, a public relations officer from Lord Howe Island, at St Andrew's Church, Bendemeer. Rosemary was appointed AO in 2002 for her work concerning abused and neglected children. He has four children, including one from his second marriage. Throughout his impressively long and rich career, he continued to represent the same rural electorate, making him on retirement the longest-serving member for New England. To a casual observer, he seemed a stereotypical Liberal Party MP—urbane, educated, and city born. He was graced with a personable nature, despite which press profiles invariably noted his aura of resilience, reminiscent of 'a battle-scarred bull elephant' (Kitney 1984, 24). In 2001 he was appointed AC for his service to the parliament and to rural and regional communities, and also received a Centenary Medal. He remains in retirement an interested observer of politics and has served in senior positions with numerous not-for-profit organisations, including the international aid agency AUSTCARE, the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, Scouts Australia (New South Wales), and the parenting body Good Beginnings Australia. His portrait by Charles Tompson hangs in Parliament House.

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