

Slipper, Peter Neil: Speaker 2011–2012

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Peter Neil Slipper, solicitor and barrister, and twenty-seventh Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 14 February 1950 at Ipswich, Queensland, eldest of three sons of Stanley Edward Slipper, a senior mechanical engineer with Queensland railways, and his wife, Joan Margaret, née McIntyre, both Queensland born.

He completed his secondary education at Ipswich Grammar School, where he was a school debater, and matriculated in 1967. At the state election of December 1974 and the federal election of December 1975, Peter was campaign director for the National Party in the state seat of Ipswich West and the federal seat of Oxley respectively: the former fell to the National Party, and the latter was narrowly retained by the future Labor Party leader Bill Hayden. He studied at the University of Queensland (LLB, 1977; BA, 1988), became Rotaract Club president, and joined the Young Nationals, of which he became state president. Practising law, both as a sole practitioner and later in partnership, he was appointed chair of the West Moreton Regional Community Corrections Board, and was also a businessman and farmer. On 14 December 1985 at St James' Cathedral, Townsville, he married Lyn Margaret Hooper, daughter of the former Queensland government minister Maxwell David Hooper. They had two children, Nicholas Peter Sebastian Slipper, and Alexandra Jane Elizabeth Slipper, but the marriage ended in 2001. On 12 August 2006 he married Ingé-Jane Alison Slipper, née Hall, at All Saints' Anglican Church Wickham Terrace, Brisbane, in a high-profile ceremony attended by future prime minister Kevin Rudd.

At the 1984 federal election, Slipper was the successful National Party candidate for the seat of Fisher in the Pine Rivers, Sunshine Coast, Northern Darling Downs and South Burnett regions, having earlier defeated the businessman Clive Palmer, amongst many others, for preselection. In his first speech to the House, he deplored the 'constant guerrilla warfare' waged in the House of Representatives, in contrast to the relative 'courtesy and reasonable co-operation' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1985, 412) of Westminster's House of Commons. He supported 'the maximum possible freedom of the individual from bureaucratic and government interference', along with 'respect

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Figure 61: Peter Slipper.

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

for the Crown and the rule of law, as well as our judicial system and parliamentary institutions' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1985, 414). The new member was also 'somewhat saddened by the standard of dress now permitted in this chamber' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1985, 414). Later that day, the Speaker, Harry Jenkins senior, warned Slipper for a frivolous point of order. Many years later, Slipper told the House that during his parliamentary career he had been ejected from the chamber for misbehaviour on five occasions, and had initially been perplexed by Jenkins's skill in identifying him as the offending interjector amid the clamour of debate; he eventually concluded that Jenkins's wife, Wendy, was pointing him out from the Speaker's gallery (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13796–97).

A supporter of the campaign to make Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen prime minister, Slipper lost his marginal seat at the election of July 1987. Reportedly, in seeking a return to parliament, he narrowly failed to obtain National Party endorsement in several different seats. In 1989 he switched to the Liberal Party, again won preselection for Fisher, and made a successful comeback at the 1993 election with the assistance of a favourable electoral boundary redistribution and a strong campaign. His extensive parliamentary committee service included chairing the House Standing Committees on Family and Community Affairs (1996–97) and on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2004–07). He was government whip (1997–98), parliamentary secretary to the minister for finance and administration (1998–2004), and acting parliamentary secretary to Prime Minister John Howard (2002–03). Following the election of November 2007 and consequent change of government, Slipper was appointed to the Speaker's panel, in February 2008. However, around this time there were reportedly moves to replace him in Fisher with his party colleague Mal Brough, who had lost his seat of Longman at the 2007 election. But as the 2008 merger agreement between the Liberal and National parties in Queensland directed that sitting members be retained, Slipper's endorsement was secure, aided by party factional considerations.

In August 2010, Slipper found himself defending an expenses bill that, among federal parliamentarians from Queensland, was exceeded only by that of former prime minister Kevin Rudd. He responded that the \$640,000 he claimed for the second half of 2009 was within relevant guidelines and mostly attributable to expenses associated with the relocation of his electorate office following further boundary changes. The following month, Julia Gillard's minority Labor government, evidently mindful that Slipper seemed unlikely to be renominated by the Liberal National Party for Fisher, successfully nominated him for the Deputy Speakership. Though an effective Deputy Speaker, Slipper's time in this role was marred by investigations into his use of parliamentary entitlements. He defended himself vigorously, contending that 'most of the payments resulted from legitimate differences in interpretation of entitlements applicable at the time' (Lewis 2010).

The resignation of Harry Jenkins as Speaker on 24 November 2011 cleared the way for the House to vote along party lines to replace him with Slipper. In a symbolic protest against this move, the opposition's Christopher Pyne nominated nine Labor members in succession; each declined. Jenkins's return to the backbench and Slipper's election as Speaker effectively gave the government two extra votes in the House. He declared that he would be 'an independent Speaker in the Westminster tradition', noting that the opposition leader, Tony Abbott, had earlier supported this model (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13797). Drily, he added that he had been 'encouraged in this opportunity to serve the parliament in a new way by the actions of some people in the Liberal National Party in recent times' (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13797). He also said: 'Frankly, I have got to admit that I am not perfect and I have made some mistakes, as some of the colourful stories about me reveal' (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13797).

Slipper's elevation to the Speakership and resignation from his party drew outrage from erstwhile colleagues. Michael O'Dwyer, director of the Liberal National Party, said that 'the state executive has determined Mr Slipper has betrayed his colleagues', and former Liberal minister Peter Reith even more bluntly labelled him 'a Liberal rat' (*ABC News* 2011). Gillard's predecessor and successor as prime minister, Kevin Rudd, later judged that the appointment 'made the government look like a desperate bunch of political opportunists who'd do anything for a vote' (Rudd 2018, 489). But some Labor members offered strong support to their former opponent. Michael Danby, the member for Melbourne Ports, described Slipper as 'a man who, with his knowledge of procedure, is perfectly fit for the role of Speaker' (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13784).

The new Speaker was determined to assert his authority. On his first day in the chair, Slipper ordered four opposition members from the chamber in quick succession, and warned: 'I would counsel all honourable members on both sides to observe civilities because, if that does not occur, our Chamber might often appear to have a lot fewer than 150 members' (H.R. Deb. 24.11.2011, 13819). When parliament returned in 2012, he again raised eyebrows, by donning robes and announcing plans for a longer and more public weekly Speaker's procession, emulating the practice of his distant predecessor Sir Billy Snedden. Whenever delivering a casting vote, he would follow convention and so 'always vote for further discussion; where no further discussion is possible, decisions should not be taken except by a majority; and a casting vote on an amendment should leave the bill in its existing form' (H.R. Deb. 7.2.2012, 12). Up to five supplementary questions would be allowed during question time, including one by non-aligned members each week.

To the surprise of many, Slipper soon established himself as an effective presiding officer. The press gallery found it 'refreshing to now have as Speaker a politician not beholden to either side of the House' (*Age* 2012, 16). But storm clouds soon gathered. It was widely believed that he would not occupy the position for long, as his personal support in Fisher appeared insufficient for re-election as an independent.

What chance he had diminished further when serious allegations against him were made public. The Department of Finance and the Australian Federal Police began investigating claims concerning improper use of travel entitlements, and a former member of his staff, James Ashby, accused him of sexual harassment.

On 22 April 2012, the day he returned from an overseas trip, Slipper issued a statement announcing that he would stand aside as Speaker until the criminal allegations against him had been resolved. When the House next sat, on 8 May 2012, he briefly took the chair to deny all allegations against him. He reiterated that he had 'sought to improve the standing of the House by introducing reforms which have been supported by all sides' (H.R. Deb. 8.5.2012, 4127), before inviting the Deputy Speaker, Anna Burke, and members of the Speaker's panel to preside over the House until the allegations were resolved. He continued, however, to carry out all other functions of the Speaker. Later that day, the opposition unsuccessfully attempted to instead have Jenkins act as Speaker, so 'that the clock should be restarted' (H.R. Deb. 8.5.2012, 4134) to when he had made way for Slipper.

Following the release of offensive text messages sent by Slipper to Ashby, including some pertaining to women, opposition leader Tony Abbott on 9 October 2012 proposed Slipper's immediate removal from office. After a long debate, the motion was narrowly lost along party lines (VP 2010-11-12/1838-9, 9.10.2012), but Slipper was privately counselled by two independents, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor, along with senior government minister and leader of the House, Anthony Albanese. Briefly returning to the chair that same day, he announced his resignation as Speaker. In so doing, he spoke of how he had 'wanted to turn our House into being like the House of Commons, where we had more interactivity and more spontaneity and where the government of the day—whoever was in government—was in fact held accountable to the people of Australia' (H.R. Deb. 9.10.2012, 11644). Two months later, a sexual harassment case initiated by Ashby was dismissed, the Federal Court justice Steven Rares having concluded that Ashby's primary motive was to politically attack Slipper. Ashby successfully appealed, but later abandoned his lawsuit.

At the 2013 federal election, Slipper ran in Fisher as an independent but was unsuccessful. The following month, he said of formal charges concerning the use of public funds to visit Canberra region wineries during 2010: 'What is breathtaking is that I am before a court ... despite a number of attempts on my part to solve the matter administratively. Yet others are able to write cheques for much more in repayment, and in their cases the matter's closed and no questions asked' (Grattan 2014). He believed he had been targeted by the coalition parties for accepting the Speakership, and had been denied access to the Minchin Protocol regularly used to resolve administrative differences with members over financial matters. In July 2014, he was found guilty of dishonestly using public funds and was sentenced to three hundred hours of community service and ordered to reimburse \$954 to taxpayers.

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He appealed and in February 2015 the conviction was set aside on the grounds that there were other potential explanations for the trips, such as seeking to inform himself about these businesses.

Although all formal proceedings against Slipper were ultimately withdrawn or dismissed, the personal price he paid extended well beyond loss of political standing. His mental health suffered from the incessant media attention, and he stated that he twice attempted suicide (Wright 2017). Often overlooked was his competent handling of the House during what was always likely to be a brief occupancy of the Speaker's chair. A man of strong religious views, he became a deacon in the Traditional Anglican Communion in 2003, a priest in 2008, and was also chancellor (senior legal adviser) to the primate until 2012. He subsequently joined the Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church as a priest in 2016, and in 2017 became its bishop in Australia.

In March 2017, an official portrait by Paul Newton was unveiled in Parliament House, the impressive proportions of which matched Slipper's tall, lean figure. Michael Danby, still a supporter, saw the painting as a 'validation' of Slipper's parliamentary service, and assured him that, with it on display, 'you'll be here haunting this place, making sure that your role in public life is remembered' (Wright 2017). Slipper initially left Queensland to practise as a barrister in Hobart, and in 2019 was appointed honorary consul for Brazil in Tasmania. He established chambers in both Brisbane and Hobart, was appointed to various Law Society of Tasmania committees and the Committee of the Sunshine Coast Bar Association, and became a nationally accredited mediator.

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