

Snedden, Sir Billy Mackie: Speaker 1976–1983

Kay Walsh and Bernie Schedvin

Sir Billy Mackie Snedden (1926–87), lawyer and seventeenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 30 December 1926 in Perth, youngest of six surviving children of Scottish-born parents Alan Snedden, stonemason, and his wife, Catherine, née Mackie. Billy was three when his father deserted the family, which then struggled financially. From the age of eight, he delivered newspapers in the morning and sold them on street corners in the afternoon—a demanding routine that shaped his work ethic. Snedden attended Highgate State and Perth Boys' schools, but he left in April 1942 to work as a law clerk for T. J. ('Diver') Hughes, while he studied at night for his Junior and Leaving certificates at Perth Technical College. In January 1944, he joined the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor's Office. The next year, he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force; he trained as an aircraftman at Busselton, Western Australia, and Somers, Victoria, before being discharged on 14 September. Eligible to further his education under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, he entered the law faculty at the University of Western Australia (LLB, 1950).

While a student, Snedden again worked in the Crown Solicitor's Office and also operated a morning newspaper run and delivered greengroceries on his bike. He participated in cricket and football, debating, and amateur dramatics. Interested in politics, he was attracted to the Liberal Party because of its emphasis on individual freedom, and he was president of the university Liberal Club. He gained experience in political campaigning by standing in a by-election for the state seat of Boulder in December 1948 and in two federal elections, for the seats of Fremantle (December 1949) and Perth (April 1951). At university, he consciously developed his voice and speaking skills, worked on his 'manners', and extended his reading. President of the Western Australian division of the Young Liberal Movement, he was elected inaugural federal chairman in 1951. On 10 March 1950 at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth, he married Joy Forsyth, a dental nurse. They were to have two sons and two daughters.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

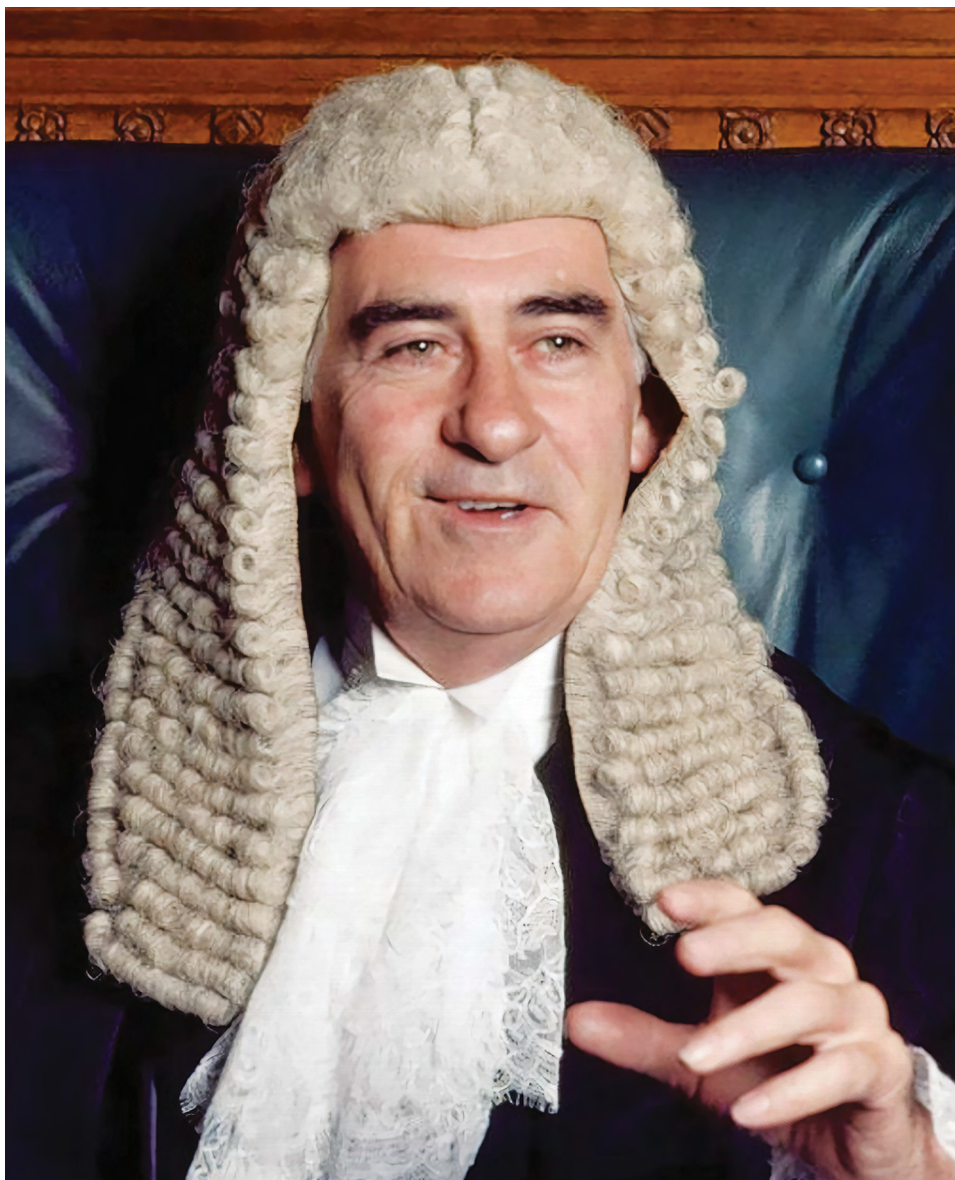


Figure 63: Billy Snedden.

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K20/1/81/13.

After completing his degree, Snedden took articles with Hardwick, Slattery & Gibson. In March 1951, he returned briefly to the Crown Solicitor's Office but left for a job with Angus & Coote Pty Ltd, mainly selling hearing aids. He was admitted to the Bar on 21 December 1951. The next year, he was appointed a selection officer in the Department of Immigration; he served in Italy for eighteen months and in England for a year. Deciding to return to Australia and to practise law, he worked for the Legal Service Bureau, Melbourne, until his admission to the Victorian Bar on 1 September 1955. The family settled at Ringwood.

In 1955 Snedden was endorsed by the Liberal Party for the federal seat of Bruce and won it on preferences at the election of 10 December. He combined parliamentary duties with legal work until March 1964, when Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies appointed him attorney-general. That year he took silk. Continuing to hold the portfolio under Prime Minister Harold Holt, he introduced a bill to deal with restrictive trade practices by administrative rather than penal process. Despite opposition from within the Liberal and Country parties and in cabinet, and resistance from the chambers of manufactures and of commerce, the Trade Practices Act 1965 was passed, albeit in a much weaker form than he had wanted.

From December 1966 to November 1969, Snedden was minister for immigration under Holt and (Sir) John Gorton. He rejected the previous emphasis on 'assimilation' and pursued instead a policy of integration, seeking to broaden the ethnic basis of Australia's immigration intake. Holt appointed him leader of the House in February 1967, a position he held until November 1968, and again, under Gorton, from November 1969 to March 1971. He learned much from Holt about the functioning of the House, including using the standing orders to the advantage of the government, such as curtailing opposition contributions by moving closure, or 'gag', motions. He later boasted of having once moved twenty-eight such motions in one day and of being known as 'Gagging Billy' (Snedden 1983–87). After Holt's disappearance in December 1967, Snedden unsuccessfully contested the party leadership.

Amid growing public dissent about Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, in November 1969 Snedden became minister for labour and national service and a member of cabinet. When (Sir) William McMahon replaced Gorton as prime minister in March 1971, he appointed Snedden treasurer. Growing inflationary pressures, exacerbated by increased welfare spending and fuel excise, complicated government budgeting and management of the economy. Snedden's two budgets—for which McMahon and the treasury had to accept some of the blame—were considered by many observers to be inadequate responses to the economic circumstances. The rising value of the Australian dollar became a contentious issue and almost precipitated a Country Party walkout from the coalition.

Faced with festering internal party divisions, Gorton resigned from a short-lived appointment as deputy leader, and Snedden succeeded him on 18 August 1971. He was appointed a privy counsellor in June the next year. After the coalition parties were defeated at the 1972 election, he was elected party leader and thus leader of the opposition. Amid seething discontent within the Liberal Party, he faced pressing issues of revising the party platform and renegotiating the terms of cooperation with the Country Party. Uncomfortable as opposition leader, he made a number of unfortunate public gaffes. The Labor prime minister, Gough Whitlam—a commanding figure—dominated him in the House. Anxious to placate his critics, Snedden forced an early election by using Senate numbers to hold up appropriation bills. Whitlam requested a double dissolution and won the subsequent election of May 1974. Snedden's position was weakened. He survived one challenge to his leadership, but his chance of becoming prime minister—a long-held ambition—was destroyed when he was ousted as leader on 21 March 1975 by Malcolm Fraser.

Snedden retreated to the back bench. Following the election of December 1975, Fraser as prime minister advised him to leave parliament and proposed a place in the judiciary. Snedden preferred a senior cabinet position, but at the prompting of party colleagues sought endorsement as Speaker, a position he felt bore appropriate status as 'the fulcrum of parliamentary democracy' (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1976, 10). He won the party nomination against six other candidates by an absolute majority on the first vote. On the opening day of the thirtieth parliament, he was nominated in the House by Don Chipp, a close friend. Chipp—himself gravely disappointed at being excluded from the ministry—warned that 'this country is in a crisis state' and 'the dignity of the Parliament needs to be restored', before proposing Snedden as possessing the 'tolerance, character and integrity' to deal with this dire situation (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1976, 10). Elected on party lines by 90 votes to 37 against the Labor candidate, the previous Speaker, Gordon Scholes, Snedden responded in kind to his nomination by promising 'to protect the dignity, the decorum and authority of the House' (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1976, 10).

From the start, Snedden's Speakership was characterised by efforts to improve the status and functionality of parliament. Succinctly proclaiming 'I am a parliamentary reformer' (Snedden 1979), he was particularly concerned by executive dominance of the legislature. He initially sought to enhance the dignity of the Speakership by donning the traditional full-bottomed judge's wig, lace, and black Queen's Counsel gown. In December 1977, he was appointed KCMG, with a formal investiture the following month in London. Shortly after, Sir Billy instituted a Canberra version of the Speaker's procession conducted in the House of Commons, hoping that such pageantry would please visitors and signify the importance of the national parliament. On the first day of each sitting week, he was led into the chamber through the front door of the House by the Serjeant-at-Arms bearing the mace, with robed and bewigged Clerks following.

Snedden felt strongly that some previous Speakers had not been properly impartial. When opposition leader, during a turbulent period in the House, he had moved a vote of no confidence in Speaker James Cope for favouring government members, stating as he did that Cope had a predilection for undignified witticisms that ‘fall flat’ (H.R. Deb. 8.4.1974, 1118; VP 1974/90–91, 8.4.1974). He advocated adopting Westminster conventions of the Speaker ceasing to be an active member of a political party, retaining the Speakership unopposed while in parliament, and contesting general elections without facing opponents from the major parties. Speaking to the National Press Club in June 1978, he offered to forgo such security of tenure for himself, ‘because I cannot be the advocate and the beneficiary’ (Davidson 1978). In May and October 1979, he distributed papers to members proposing the adoption of such arrangements, but he was to remain frustrated by the disparity between interest from the public and the media on the one hand, and the paucity of cross-party support on the other. He succeeded only in declining to participate in party room meetings unless an especially important matter was due for discussion.

Recognising the risks posed by his independent-mindedness and tenuous personal relationship with Fraser, Snedden maintained his practice as a barrister. In spite of this evident insecurity, he appeared confident in the chair. To encourage the flow of debate, he took a common-sense approach to interpreting standing orders where he felt they were silent or unclear, such as on unparliamentary remarks and supplementary questions. He attempted to redress any advantage given to government members, particularly ministers, in the standing orders, and ignored excessive demands by party colleagues for the ‘call’ during question time (Snedden 1983–87). Lengthy and irrelevant questions and answers were curtailed, and he made rulings constraining the incorporation of unread documents into *Hansard* (H.R. Deb. 21.10.1982, 2339–40). He advocated, without success, that the Speaker should have discretion to disallow gag or closure motions, as in House of Commons practice (Snedden 1983–87). In 1979 Snedden commissioned the Clerk of the House, John (Jack) Pettifer, to prepare a paper canvassing the establishment of eight House standing committees on legislation and estimates, replacing ad hoc committees that had operated with little effect. These were intended to relieve the House of the need to examine increasing numbers of bills and to improve opportunities for opposition and backbench members to contribute. Committees along these lines were established after Snedden retired from parliament.

Snedden had more control over the chamber than did some of his predecessors—notably Cope—making him willing to tolerate a degree of rowdiness as an expression of ‘deep seated convictions’ in a ‘truly free democratic parliamentary system’ (Snedden 1979, 14). His experience, particularly as leader of the House, made him confident that he ‘knew every trick that there was’ (Snedden 1983–87). In the chair, he was voluble and earnest, but occasionally used a quick wit to discipline unruly members. He once ‘sat down’ both Whitlam and Fraser, primly reminding them that their

behaviour should reflect their status 'as leaders in the national parliament' (H.R. Deb. 4.5.1977, 1511). Snedden encouraged Pettifer to document House procedure, leading to publication of the first edition of *House of Representatives Practice* in 1981.

Resentful of the executive's power over parliamentary spending, Snedden agitated for a separate budget, insisting that, as Speaker, he must be consulted on estimates of parliamentary expenditure. To hold governments to account, the parliament needed, he felt, to be financially independent and well resourced. In April 1981, he was a witness before the Senate Select Committee on Parliament's Appropriations and Staffing. This was the first time a Speaker had appeared before a Senate committee, and it led to the Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments) Act 1982–83, which separated funding for parliament from the appropriations for the 'ordinary annual services of government'. The Act provided for a global figure for each parliamentary department, effectively conceding, as the treasurer, John Howard, said in introducing the bill, 'that detailed control over individual expenditure items for the Parliament was not necessary'; Howard added that these figures had 'been agreed to between the leaders of the Houses and the Presiding Officers' (H.R. Deb. 17.8.1982, 270–71, 431). Yet just a few years later, prominent historians of the parliament adjudged that although these financial changes brought more flexibility to budgeting they did not greatly inhibit executive influence, and were 'much more symbolic than real' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 406). A number of parliamentary functions administered by executive departments were transferred to the parliament, including contributions to international parliamentary associations. The Public Service Acts Amendment Act 1982 provided for more parliamentary autonomy in staffing arrangements by enabling the Speaker to appoint and promote departmental officers (other than the Clerk) and to create offices within the department without Executive Council approval.

During his first years in parliament, Snedden had shared an office with other backbenchers, at times resorting to using a desk in the party room. As Speaker, he and the Senate President, Sir Condor Laucke, arranged for some parliamentary staff to work from venues outside the provisional Parliament House, such as the nearby East Block, thereby allowing an office for every member. Snedden believed that the inadequacy of the provisional Parliament House detracted from efficiency, while the inability to accommodate research staff contributed to dominance by the better-resourced executive. As attorney-general, he had represented Menzies on the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House and, from April 1976, he and Laucke jointly chaired a new incarnation of this committee. Snedden sought funding and bipartisan support for a permanent parliament building and, in 1978, the Fraser government announced a design competition. When the project finally got under way, he personally scrutinised plans, insisting that the parliament itself should have ultimate say over design elements. He ensured provision for the future televising of parliament, consistent with his view that 'people ought to be able to make their own judgments' about their representatives (Davidson 1978).

The most difficult situation Snedden faced as Speaker arose on 18 February 1982 when Bob Hawke, then an opposition frontbencher, accused Fraser of lying in relation to comments by Victorian opposition leader John Cain concerning royal commissions into the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union and the Builders Labourers Federation. Snedden named Hawke when he refused to withdraw the accusation, amid an eruption of interjections and opposition members chanting 'lies, lies, lies' (H.R. Deb. 18.2.1982, 321). His attempt to break the stalemate by suggesting that Fraser 'consider a conciliatory statement' (H.R. Deb. 18.2.1982, 323) was disregarded by the outraged prime minister. A motion to suspend Hawke was put by a government minister, but Snedden realised that if this were carried by the government majority, he would then have to deal in the same way with the many opposition interjectors—a 'charade which would destroy the Parliament's effectiveness' and possibly spark 'physical violence in the place' (Snedden and Schedvin 1990, 222). He instead declined to put the question on the motion and called for thirty seconds of silence. Later that day, he left the chamber fully expecting that Fraser would soon move a no-confidence motion against him. But a count by government whips determined that insufficient government members would support such a move, and Fraser reluctantly let the matter drop. Snedden was clearly more respected by party colleagues than by the prime minister.

Following the Fraser government's defeat in March 1983, Snedden resigned from parliament in emulation of the Westminster convention that 'when the Speaker leaves the chair he leaves the House' (H.R. Deb. 21.4.1983, 6). In his final speech to the House, he reiterated his belief in the Speaker's importance as the 'guardian of the right of each member' to 'speak and to demand the truth' (H.R. Deb. 21.4.1983, 5). Westminster practice was yet to be adopted, but he felt that 'general knowledge and consideration of the convention have expanded' and so 'the status of the Speaker has thereby been enhanced, together with an increase in the public perception of the status of parliament' (H.R. Deb. 21.4.1983, 6).

Having separated from his wife, Snedden moved into a flat in inner-city Melbourne. After so many years away from full-time legal practice, he had difficulty resuming his profession, and joined the boards of a number of retail and finance companies. He became patron of the 'Coterie' group of prominent supporters of the Melbourne Football Club and club chairman (1980–85); he was also a director of the Victorian Football League. Proud of his Scottish heritage, he was a senior vice-president of the Melbourne Scots Club. He continued to work on behalf of the Liberal Party, mainly by raising funds, and joined its state finance committee in 1986.

In retirement, Snedden proudly described the new parliament building under construction as 'my product' (Snedden and Schedvin 1990, 228), yet he never saw the completed structure. He died suddenly of heart disease on 25 June 1987. Following a state funeral at Scots' Church, Melbourne, he was cremated. His estranged wife

'ORDER, ORDER!'

and their children survived him. When Clyde Cameron retired after more than thirty years in the House, he described Snedden as 'the best Speaker I have sat under' (H.R. Deb. 18.9.1980, 1574), having made a similar comment about Archie Cameron. Snedden's party colleague Andrew Peacock considered him 'the most gracious man with whom I had worked' (H.R. Deb. 14.9.1987, 28). Yet his 'warmth, vitality and sincerity' (Chipp and Larkin 1978, 154) were largely lost in television appearances in which he often appeared wooden, a major handicap when he was opposition leader. A portrait of Snedden by June Mendoza was completed in 1984 and hangs in Parliament House. After his death, he was widely acknowledged as an energetic and impartial Speaker who had done much to enhance the profile of the office, and to improve procedural efficiency. Few Speakers had so doggedly sought to embed the highest ideals of the Speakership in House practice; in the words of his collaborator and biographer, 'he was Parliament's champion' (Snedden and Schedvin 1990, 252).

This article supplements the original Volume 18 ADB biography, published 2012, authored by Bernie Schedvin. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/snedden-sir-billy-mackie-15519/text26731

Select bibliography

- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 8 April 1974, 1117–26
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 17 February 1976, 3–10
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 4 May 1977, 1510–12
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 18 September 1980, 1569–77
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1982, 320–24
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 17 August 1982, 270–71, 431
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 21 October 1982, 2339–40
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 26 October 1982, 2501–3
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 21 April 1983, 5–6
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 September 1987, 24–37
- Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1974, 90–91
- Canberra Times*. 'Permanent Parliament "To Aid Reforms"'. 20 October 1979, 3
- Canberra Times*. 'Sir Billy Had Few Enemies, Though Not a Lot of Natural Allies'. 28 June 1987, 2
- Chipp, Don, and John Larkin. *Don Chipp: The Third Man*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1978

- Davidson, Gay. 'Australia's Tragedy He Did Not Win: Snedden'. *Canberra Times*, 9 June 1978, 1
- Kelly, Paul. *The Unmaking of Gough*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976.
- National Library of Australia. MS 6216, Papers of Billy Mackie Snedden
- Pender, Jim. 'Billy Snedden and the Reform of Parliament'. *Legislative Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 68–72
- Reid, G. S. and Martyn Forrest. *Australia's Commonwealth Parliament, 1901–1988: Ten Perspectives*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1989
- Snedden, Billy. Interview by Catherine Santamaria, June–August 1976. National Library of Australia
- Snedden, Billy. *Walter Burley Griffin Memorial Lecture*. Canberra: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, ACT Chapter, 1979
- Snedden, Billy. Interview by Bernadette Schedvin, 1983–87. Parliament's Oral History Project. National Library of Australia
- Snedden, Billy. 'Ministers in Parliament—A Speaker's Eye View'. In *Responsible Government in Australia*, edited by Patrick Weller and Dean Jaensch, 68–85. Richmond, Vic.: Drummond, 1980
- Snedden, Billy Mackie, and M. Bernie Schedvin. *Billy Snedden: An Unlikely Liberal*. South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1990

This text is taken from '*Order, Order!': A Biographical Dictionary of Speakers, Deputy Speakers and Clerks of the Australian House of Representatives*', edited by Stephen Wilks, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/OO.2023.61