

'A decent and amiable man'

JIM COPE MP -

Stephen Holt examines the legacy of a veteran Laborite, as revealed in the Library's Oral History Collection

In Australian politics 1975 was a historic year, with the Senate blocking the budget, causing the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, to dismiss Gough Whitlam as prime minister and replace him with Malcolm Fraser. A large cast of characters, some reluctantly and some less so, got caught up in the action. One of the more unwilling participants was the veteran Australian Labor Party (ALP) politician, Jim Cope, whose forced resignation as Speaker of the House of Representatives on 27 February contributed to the prevailing sense of crisis.

Cope left parliament altogether when it was dissolved on 11 November 1975, and thereafter sought to live a quieter life. His silence was not total, however. In 1978 and 1983, he took part in oral history interviews with journalist Mel Pratt and academic Andrew Moore. These two interviews, the tapes and transcripts form part of the National Library's impressive collection of oral history material. While covering Cope's fate in 1975, they also place it in the broader context of his long career as a loyal Labor man.

The interviews give a good outline of Cope's formative years. He was born in Surry Hills in inner Sydney in 1907, left school at the age of 14, and his residence for most of his adult working life was a terrace house in neighbouring working-class Redfern. A spell of unemployment during the Great Depression ended when he got a job in a billiards saloon. During World War II, which created a demand for skilled workers, Cope was able to train as a glassblower. He was never deprived of

work again—at least until 1975.

Redfern was a Labor stronghold, and Cope did not dissent from the dominant local faith. He joined the party in 1930. At various times over the next two decades, he was secretary of his ALP branch in Redfern and helped to organise election campaigns.

Cope became a federal parliamentary candidate in 1955, when his local member died and a by-election was held. Because the seat was safe for Labor, the only contest that mattered was the ALP preselection ballot. Cope secured party nomination because he was known to support federal leader Dr H.V. Evatt at a time when the ALP was bitterly divided between the friends and the demonised foes of Dr Evatt.

In the mid-1950s Labor's nemesis Robert Menzies dominated federal politics, but Cope, after he arrived in Canberra, was not too disconsolate. Away from the ritualised contention of parliamentary debates, he was respectful of his political opponents:

I never ever was hostile against the Liberal or Country Party members in particular, because I know that was their job, to put their case in the House and I appreciated it. That's what democracy is all about.

An affable man, Cope was renowned for 'witty interjections' and 'smart repartee' in the legislative chamber—he was, as Andrew Moore reminded him in their interview, likened to Buster Keaton. He was also the parliamentary billiards and snooker champion. But he had a more serious side as well, helping pensioners in his electorate by



Australian Information Service
*Mr James Francis Cope, Speaker
in the House of Representatives
of the Australian Federal
Parliament 1973*
b&tw photograph; 21.6 x 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3119265



above:
 Australian Information Service
Portrait of Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia, 1972-1975
 [between 1972 and 1975]
 b&w negative
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an12265747

below left:
 Unknown photographer
Mr Cope, Speaker of the House of Representatives, in Chair 1973
 Courtesy National Archives of Australia
 image no. A6180, 8/5/73/51

below right:
 Michael Jensen (b.1943)
Opening of Parliament on 9 July 1974 by Sir Paul Hasluck, Governor-General 1969-1974, Parliament House, Canberra 1974
 b&w photograph; 23.7 x 29.1 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3299155

identifying and publicising their grievances. He also had a vast knowledge of Australia's electoral laws and voting statistics. He served on the Public Accounts Committee and mastered the parliamentary standing orders.

Cope's highest ambition was to become the next Labor Speaker of the House of Representatives. His expectation of a reward for effort was sealed after a significant political episode in April 1968. What exactly happened is revealed in a fascinating aside in Cope's interview with Mel Pratt:

Gough Whitlam resigned as leader of the Opposition, and recontested against Jim Cairns and only won by six votes. I would say without hesitation, I don't say this egotistically, but I would say that without [Caucus colleague] Rex Connor and myself, [Whitlam] could never have won it. We were his campaign directors.

Labor, out of office since 1949, won the December 1972 federal election, and Cope became Speaker on 27 February 1973. He was regarded with fondness by all of his colleagues, irrespective of party allegiance, but the atmospherics of Canberra had altered as a result of the change of government. Whitlam, as prime minister, expected Federal Parliament to operate as an efficient machine churning out reform. The Liberal and Country Party members, angered at being consigned to the Opposition, were equally determined to frustrate the prime minister through obstruction in the Senate and outbursts of dissent in the House of

Representatives. The adversarial side of parliamentary life was ratcheted up.

On becoming Speaker, Cope hoped to put his Buster Keating image behind him. He wanted to be a firm but fair presiding officer and, as he later emphasised, intended to do 'the best I could in the full traditions and workings of the Westminster system'. Unfortunately this wish was bound to be frustrated in the pressurised Whitlam era.

Cope was not an imposing figure when seated in the presiding officer's ceremonial chair. He had a rasping voice, his eyesight was failing and he was prevented by his party from wearing the traditional Speaker's wig. His authority suffered and he failed to control Opposition members who blithely ignored his calls for order as they bombarded government ministers with interjections. The mayhem got worse whenever Cope 'named' members as a prelude to their being suspended (something he himself had suffered in the past).

By the beginning of 1975, the Speaker's inability to maintain order was a deep exasperation to the Whitlam government. Cope (who was not seeking another term in parliament) was becoming an increasingly isolated and ignored figure. He was, in his own words, 'the meat in the sandwich' between the prime minister and Opposition leader, Billy Snedden. 'They were,' he ruefully recalled, 'cross-firing across the table practically all day at one another.'

The season of unhappiness culminated on the second anniversary of Cope's election to



the Speaker's chair. In the midst of raucous proceedings on 27 February 1975, he was forced to name his Labor colleague, Clyde Cameron, after Cameron failed to withdraw a disrespectful comment directed at the chair. ('Look, I don't give a damn what you say.') Normally government members immediately vote to suspend a member named by the Speaker but, on this occasion, they had to break with accepted custom in obedience to a split-second decision made by the prime minister that Cameron should not be suspended. Cope's finest moment as Speaker came when, with calmness and dignity, he announced his resignation from his post, after the Opposition's vote to suspend Cameron was lost.

Cope, as he later admitted, was 'incensed' and 'depressed' as a result of his sudden loss of a high office in such humiliating circumstances. The bond which he had thought to be so strong with Whitlam because of the victorious 1968 leadership tussle was shown to count for nothing. Whitlam's behaviour confirmed Cope's fears that the prime minister was far too 'impetuous' for his own good.

Cope was determined to do or say nothing that would add to the damaging controversy surrounding his resignation. In its immediate wake, he refused to let inquisitive journalists quiz him. Appearances were kept up, until the very day that Sir John Kerr dismissed Gough Whitlam and dissolved parliament. At the last Caucus he ever attended, Cope shook hands with Whitlam in an effort to show there was no split in Labor's ranks. Solidarity, Cope believed, was the supreme virtue of politics. His was the creed of the loyalist: 'I've always put the party before the individual, always have and always will.'

True to his word, Cope continued to support Labor after leaving parliament. At election times, he handed out how-to-vote cards, and he still attended local branch meetings. Bob Hawke's victory in 1983 was a source of pleasure.

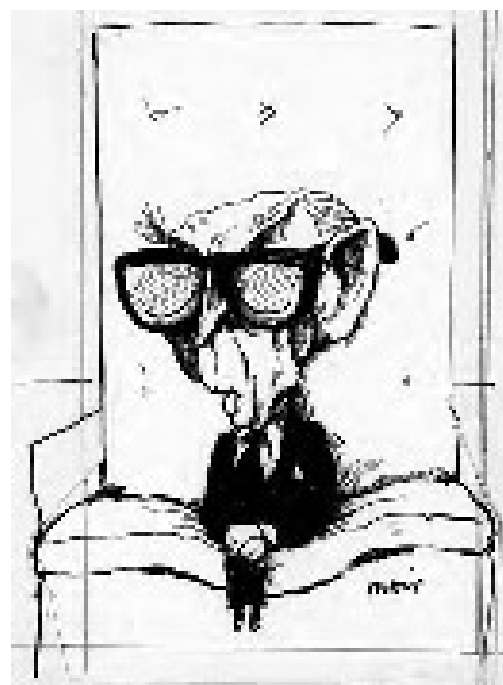
In retirement, Cope moved from Redfern to the balmy climes of waterside Sans Souci. His migration mirrored a broader Sydney trend, as older working-class inhabitants vanished from the inner suburbs to be replaced in part by younger tertiary-educated folk with modish ideas. Cope was not in tune with the changing demographics and, from his oral history interviews, it is



clear where his sympathies lay when conflict erupted in local ALP branches as a result of the presence of newer radical elements. His preferred candidate in the preselection contest for his old seat was the eventual nominee, Les McMahon. The youthful progressives were not impressed with McMahon, but Cope felt differently. His successor, he considered, was 'a man of great ability'. A good Labor man to the end, Cope would not have a bad word said about the ALP officials (such as Graham Richardson) who threw their weight behind McMahon.

Jim Cope was a decent and amiable man. His first wish always was to avoid offending or embarrassing past colleagues. He would willingly have taken all of his parliamentary memories with him to the grave when he died in 1999 but, from the perspective of the broader historical record, this happily was not to be. His experiences as a Labor stalwart faced with shifting circumstances live on in his oral history interviews held in the National Library. Anyone interested in acquiring new insights into the Whitlam era will benefit from studying them.

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top:
Alan Moir (b.1945)
Arming Up (Gough Whitlam vs Billy Snedden) 1975
pen and ink on board
18.0 x 24.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3081107

above:
Alan Moir (b.1945)
Mr Cope c.1973
pen and ink on paper
10.9 x 15.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24092862