



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Mahon, Hon. Hugh

SPEECH

Monday, 21 November 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker	Perrett, Graham, MP	Question No.	

Mr PERRETT (Moreton—Opposition Whip) (11:01): I am very pleased to move:

That this House:

(1) recognises that:

- (a) prior to the passage of the *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* the Houses of the Australian Parliament had the power to expel a Senator or Member of the House of Representatives;
- (b) the expulsion of a Member of this House is the most drastic of sanctions;
- (c) on 11 November 1920, the then Member for Kalgoorlie, Mr Hugh Mahon, was expelled from this House; and
- (d) Mr Mahon is the only Member to have ever been expelled from this House;

(2) acknowledges that Mr Mahon was expelled:

- (a) by a motion brought on hastily and with limited time for debate;
- (b) by a vote of the House on party lines; and
- (c) without the due process and procedural fairness that such an important issue deserves; and

(3) recognises that:

- (a) it was unjust on the limited evidence for the institution to which Mr Mahon had been democratically elected to reverse the decision of his constituents; and
- (b) the expulsion of Mr Mahon was a misuse of the power then invested in the House.

This motion recognises the unjust expulsion of a member of this House 96 years ago. This motion is motivated by two of my former colleagues—Sharryn Jackson and Melissa Parke. I note that the current member for Fremantle will be following me speaking on this motion.

Hugh Mahon was a founding member of the federal parliament. The Hon. Mr Mahon served as a member for 17 years and is the only member ever to have been expelled from federal parliament thus far. Thankfully, our parliament no longer holds the power to expel an elected member, but it did right up until 1987, when it passed the *Parliamentary Privileges Act*.

Hugh Mahon represented the federal seat of Coolgardie and then Kalgoorlie for the Australian Labor Party. Mahon, like most of the founding members of the Australian parliament, was not born in Australia. He was Irish. He came to Australia in 1882, having been a journalist and political activist in his mother country. He had even spent time in a Dublin jail with Charles Stewart Parnell, the famous Irish national land leaguer.

Mahon was not known for his frivolity. He was once described as 'a democrat whose snobbish coldness of demeanour would make a snake shudder'. The events that led to Hugh Mahon's expulsion from parliament reflect more on the character of others than on Mr Mahon himself. It is important to put some context to the timing of the expulsion to understand the political climate surrounding the event. Hugh Mahon was expelled from parliament on 11 November 1920, a mere four years after the Easter 1916 uprising. One month before his expulsion, in October 1920, in Cork, Ireland, Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney died in jail after a 74-day hunger strike. MacSwiney was imprisoned after having been charged with sedition by the British.

Mahon attended an Ireland league meeting in Melbourne on 7 November where he savagely attacked British policy and the Empire. He referred to the British Empire as 'this bloody and accursed despotism'. Two days after the league meeting Prime Minister Billy Hughes, a former Labor member, read a portion of Mahon's speech in parliament and asked Mahon if it were correct. The *Hansard* reflects that Mahon protested that he had never been disobedient to the rules of the House or shown disrespect to the Speaker of the House. When Prime Minister Hughes asked whether the House could take it that the report of his statement was correct, Mahon responded, 'You are not to take anything of the kind.' A letter was sent to Mahon advising him that a motion was to be moved in parliament calling for his expulsion. Mahon informed the Prime Minister in writing that his speech was not seditious or disloyal and that the reported extracts were incomplete and taken out of context.

Unfortunately, Mahon was unable to be present in the House when the motion was moved to expel him due to an accident. In his absence the motion that Hugh Mahon be expelled from the House, having by seditious and disloyal utterances been guilty of conduct unfitting to remain a member of this House, was moved. The motion was passed with only Mahon's 25 Labor colleagues dissenting, ending the parliamentary career of Hugh Mahon, a member democratically elected by his constituents.

As Martin Luther King Jr once said:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Upon his expulsion, Hugh Mahon showed his true loyalty to the parliament. Even though he knew there was no substance to the complaint made against him, he respected the fact that a majority of the House had voted to expel him. Hugh Mahon's living descendants can be proud of the way he conducted himself during what would have been a very difficult time for him and his family. They can be proud of his loyalty to his Irish roots, to his beloved Labor Party and to the nation he had served loyally and faithfully for 17 years as a member of this House.

Hugh Mahon's expulsion can be seen, with the benefit of hindsight, as mere grubby political manoeuvring, especially when the sword thrower at the time of his expulsion, later, in a condolence motion made in the House of Representatives upon Mahon's death, professed an unceasing respect and admiration for Mahon and his fervent love for his country—not sentiments that could coexist with a genuine conviction that Mahon had uttered 'seditious and disloyal' statements.

I believe it is important that this House, the modern parliament, now recognises, although belatedly, that the expulsion of Mahon was a misuse of the political power that the House possessed at that time. I acknowledge the distress that this event has caused the Mahon family, and I hope that his descendants are able to take some comfort from this motion. I fervently hope that this recognition today by my colleagues will correct the true legacy of one of this parliament's founding members, the Hon. Hugh Mahon.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Buchholz): I thank the member. Is there a seconder?

Mr Josh Wilson: I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I thank the seconder.