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The Albanese government has announced the next speaker of the house. What's the role and why is it important?

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The Albanese government has chosen its candidate to be the new speaker.

Milton Dick has been the member for Oxley in Queensland since 2016. The former Brisbane City Councillor is almost certain to be formally endorsed by the House of Representatives when the new parliament meets on July 26.

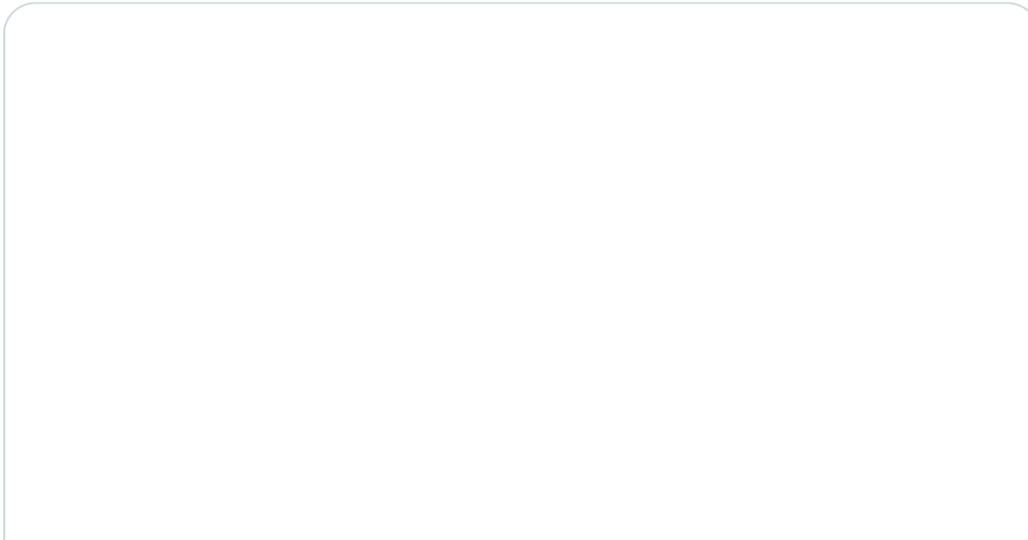
He was chosen in a factional deal ahead of Rob Mitchell, the second deputy speaker since 2013. Mitchell was Labor's nominee when the respected Tony Smith stepped down as speaker in November 2021. But the Liberal Andrew Wallace was chosen along party lines, and is now the third shortest-serving speaker, after Ian Sinclair (1998) and the very obscure Carty Salmon (1909-10).

Dick's selection should continue the pattern of the speaker being effectively chosen by the government. Like most speakers, he's not regarded as a ministerial contender.

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Queensland Labor backbencher Milton Dick will be formally offered the role of Speaker of the House of Representatives when federal parliament resumes next week.



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Why not an independent speaker?

Given Labor's small majority in the House of Representatives, there had been conjecture that a cross-bencher may have been chosen.

Indeed, had Labor fallen short of a majority, the members themselves may have done so. Andrew Wilkie, first elected in 2010, was mentioned as having the requisite parliamentary experience. Rebekha Sharkie, a member since 2016, had also been suggested, by fellow cross-bencher Zali Steggall.

An independent incumbent could have strengthened the government's position by virtue of the speaker only voting in the house when a casting vote is needed to resolve a tie.

But there's a strong convention that speakers do not participate in policy debates. This is a big ask for any independent. The very first speaker, Frederick Holder, was a man of strong opinions who vented frustration over an "almost overwhelming desire to step out of the chair and tear off the gag".

Albanese has also avoided emulating Prime Minister Joseph Cook. He came to office in 1913 with a one seat majority that saw the speaker, Elliot Johnson, repeatedly exercising a casting vote.

The opposition tried hard to catch Johnson and the government short through motions of censure and of dissent from the chair, and by refusing pairs. Yet Johnson used his casting vote in only ten of 69 divisions during this short-lived government, with most votes in the house then, as now, not being terribly controversial.

Read more: Andrew Wallace becomes the new speaker – a role that's never been more important in Australian politics

The role of the speaker

Given the Labor government's small majority, the speaker's role will be especially important in this parliament. The much larger cross-bench will be arguing for a greater voice.

There's a push to make question time more informative. One suggestion is to cut back on "Dorothy Dixers". These are questions typically concocted by ministers' staff to be asked by compliant government backbenchers. Ministers invariably give prepared answers praising their own performance and disparaging the opposition.

Dick is no doubt pleased to have this prestigious post. His portrait will one day hang in the halls of parliament for posterity. On formal occasions, the speaker ranks ahead of the chief justice, the deputy prime minister and former prime ministers in the official table of precedence.

Yet speakers pretend to be reluctantly dragged to the position. This rather cute charade reflects a British political tradition. Standing up to the king as parliament's representative was once a decidedly dangerous pastime.

 Previous Speaker of the House Andrew Wallace in Parliament

The speaker is a bulwark against the worst of partisanship. Mick Tsikas/AAP

The speaker is the House of Representative's "principal officer". The incumbent has wide ceremonial and administrative functions in Parliament House, many being shared with the president of the Senate.

The most public role speakers have is presiding over the debates in the House, ensuring these are conducted according to standing orders. This makes their job anything but a sinecure. Most Australians are well aware of televised images of the incumbent perched in the speaker's chair at the head of the chamber during question time trying to manage 150 attention-hungry MPs.

Tolerance of procedural mistakes is next to zero, and blunders are slow to be forgotten. One speaker, Stephen Martin, was only half joking when he said his experience as a rugby league referee and high school teacher was good preparation.

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Why is the speaker important?

A good speaker is a bulwark against the worst excesses of political partisanship. Truly effective ones determine the tone of the house. They skilfully exercise their personal authority with a seemingly light touch.

Most have successfully balanced party loyalty with wider expectations of the office. They struck a workable compromise between partiality to their own government and keeping favouritism within bounds the opposition could tolerate.

Only a few, such as the truculent Archie Cameron in the 1950s, faced persistent opposition calls for resignation. Such qualified non-partisanship was probably helped by the speakership not usually having served as a stepping stone into the ministry.

This pragmatic model is supported by deep roots in our little appreciated parliamentary history and in the wider Australian "fair go" ethos. But it should never be taken for granted. It needs to be defended against the remorseless politicisation of public life.

The new speaker is likely to be sorely tested by the opposition, a near standard experience for freshly minted presiding officers. All eyes will be on whether Dick emulates the example set by Tony Smith, whose impartiality stretched to preparedness to defy his party peers. Typically, speakers step back from party politics, with many having chosen not to attend party room or caucus meetings.

Like Smith, Dick will have the support of the Clerk of the House Claressa Surtees and her staff in the Department of the House of Representatives. The department has been spared the worst of the hollowing out of skills and independence afflicting so much of the mainstream public service.

How Dick performs and is treated by both sides of the House will be an important reality check of the new government's goal of lifting the standards of our political culture. Expectations, and hopes, are high!