

Adermann, Sir Charles Frederick: Chairman of Committees 1950–1958

John Hawkins

Sir Charles Frederick Adermann (1896–1979), farmer and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 3 August 1896 at Vernor Siding in south-east Queensland, eighth child of Carl Friederich Adermann, farmer, and his wife Emilie, née Litzow, both migrants from Germany. Having settled at Wooroolin, in 1909 the Adermanns founded the first congregation of the Churches of Christ in the Kingaroy district. Educated at Lowood and Wooroolin state schools to age thirteen, Charlie later took correspondence courses in farm management. He tried to join the Australian Imperial Force in 1916 when he learned that his brother Robert had been killed in action, but was rejected on medical grounds. Another brother, Ernest, became member for New Plymouth in the New Zealand parliament (1943–66).

Working on his parents' farm, Adermann began to emerge as a primary industry leader. Farmers in the South Burnett region had turned to peanut-growing, seeking an alternative cash crop to maize. When increased production led to a sharp reduction in price during the 1924 season, the farmers refused to sell their product and approached the state government under the terms of the Primary Products Pools Act 1922–23 to form a Peanut (later Peanut Marketing) Board. As chairman of the board (1925–31, 1934–52), Adermann presided over the gradual stabilisation of the industry; through a compulsory collective marketing system, the board treated, stored, and sold annual crops on behalf of growers. On 7 April 1926 at St Andrew's Anglican Church, Wooroolin, he married Mildred Turner, and from 1931 they worked their own farm in the district.

A man of deep religious faith, Adermann was president of the Queensland and federal conferences of the Churches of Christ. Beginning in 1938, as 'Uncle John' he delivered a popular Sunday school broadcast on radio 4SB in the hope that 'a children's session of this type, with children's voices, would have a tendency to encourage others to read

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 3: Charles Adermann.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/4144 #PIC/4144.

the word of God' (*Charleville Times* 1943, 5). He continued these broadcasts until the last year of his life. Other service was as chairman of the local wartime patriotic fund and as a councillor of Kingaroy Shire (1939–46).

Convinced that farmers needed their own political representation, in 1943 Adermann was the Country Party candidate for the federal seat of Maranoa. His success was the only conservative gain in an election that otherwise saw a pronounced national swing to the Australian Labor Party government led by John Curtin. Adermann signalled what his electors could expect by laconically telling the local press that 'all this publicity business is not for me' (*Charleville Times* 1943, 5). He nonetheless consolidated his hold on Maranoa at the 1946 election with a swing of over 10 per cent. Another peanut farmer from the region, (Sir) Johannes (Joh) Bjelke-Petersen, was secretary of the Country Party's local branch; in 1947 Adermann encouraged him to run for the state seat of Nanango. At the 1949 election Adermann moved to the newly created federal seat of Fisher, which he was to hold at the following eight elections, including being unopposed in 1955. He fought for an improved wool marketing scheme and greater Commonwealth extension service grants to encourage improved agricultural techniques. His earnestness and stridency in parliamentary debate grated on Labor members. In June 1949 Arthur Calwell alleged that Adermann had organised a cooperative society which he later disbanded at the behest of the agricultural company Dalgety & Co. Ltd and other interested parties, and also had used his position as chairman of the Peanut Marketing Board to attempt to influence classification of his third-grade peanuts as first grade. Adermann vehemently denied the allegations, but Prime Minister Ben Chifley declined his request for a formal inquiry.

After (Sir) Robert Menzies led the Liberal–Country Party coalition to government in December 1949, Adermann was elected unopposed as Chairman of Committees on 22 February 1950. His tenure did not begin well. During a debate the following month on a ruling by Speaker Archie Cameron he condescendingly questioned Dr Herbert Evatt's appreciation of the law by telling him what 'the right honorable member should know, because of his legal training' (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1950, 683). In April the opposition tried to censure him for disregarding a longstanding arrangement whereby the chair's call during contentious debates would alternate between the government and the opposition. Things improved temporarily when he acted as Speaker while Cameron was visiting London for the October 1950 opening of the restored House of Commons chamber. Some commentators found his approach a welcome relief from Cameron's unrelenting rigour, with Adermann behaving as 'a disciplinarian or a diplomat as the occasion demands' (McDonnell 1950, 8). Adermann was also praised by the press for upholding the right of lobbyists to approach members in King's Hall, a public area.

Yet in 1951 when the government proposed Adermann for re-election as Chairman of Committees, Labor's outspoken Eddie Ward excoriated him as 'bitterly prejudiced against members of the Labor party, and brutally unfair and incompetent' (H.R. Deb. 20.6.1951, 132). Adermann continued when not presiding to enter into debates on motions challenging Cameron's rulings and, in so doing, may have attracted some of the disdain in which Cameron was held by the opposition. This was not helped by his occasionally drawing on the scriptures, such as by proclaiming that 'I should be justified in making a charge against them [opposition members] in the terms of chapter 9, verse 3, of Jeremiah, because the usual term would not be allowed under the Standing Orders' (H.R. Deb. 21.5.1952, 634). He made use of the controversial standing order 303, which allowed him to readily exclude an unruly member. His reappointment as Chairman by the House after the 1954 election was also opposed, with the Labor member Bill Edmonds, angry at having been suspended for interjecting, claiming that Adermann had 'demanded of me an apology but could not tell me why' (H.R. Deb. 4.8.1954, 19). Edmonds's colleague Bill Bryson, the member for Wills, added that Adermann was 'incapable of acting without bias' (H.R. Deb. 4.8.1954, 20).

From August 1955 Cameron's ill health resulted in Adermann again acting as Speaker, this time for five and a half months. In 1956 Labor opposed his re-election as Chairman of Committees, the member for Batman, Alan Bird, describing him as 'too temperamental for the position', leading to 'too many unnecessary incidents' (H.R. Deb. 15.2.1956, 28–29). After Cameron's death in August of that year, Adermann received unexpected encouragement to accept nomination for the Speakership from the Labor member Rowland James on the grounds of 'the principle of seniority of employment, which the Miners Federation has always stood for' (H.R. Deb. 29.8.1956, 5). (Sir) John McLeay, however, was chosen in line with the Liberal Party's senior status in the coalition.

Following the 1958 election, Adermann left the Deputy Speakership and was appointed minister for primary industry, marking the return of this portfolio to the Country Party after the tenure of the Sydney Liberal (Sir) William McMahon. Adermann was prominent in his party's successful push for further subsidies, grants, and other assistance to rural producers. His Country Party colleague Doug Anthony recalled him as a minister 'of great tenacity' who fought in cabinet repeatedly for an improved wool marketing scheme, 'no matter how often he was defeated' (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1979, 1985). He was regarded as dogged and an avoider of pitfalls rather than as outstanding. Even as a minister he liked to spend as much time as possible in the paddocks of his farm near Kingaroy. He was elevated to cabinet in February 1960, still holding the primary industry portfolio. In December 1963, following the retirement of (Sir) Charles Davidson, Adermann was elected deputy leader of the Country Party. Described by Anthony as 'first and foremost a parliamentarian' (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1979, 1985), Adermann attended three conferences of the Commonwealth Parliamentary

Association. In December 1965, the day after he returned from leading the Australian delegation to an association conference in New Zealand, the press gallery was surprised to observe him in the House as ‘he made a funny face, poked out his tongue and, waving his arms about, did a little dance’ (*Canberra Times* 1965, 8), probably an attempt to demonstrate the Māori haka.

Adermann reached the peak of his political career in 1966, when he rose to fifth in cabinet seniority under Prime Minister Harold Holt and was appointed a privy counsellor at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace. But at about this time his party leader, (Sir) John McEwen, was becoming increasingly concerned about the need for a leadership succession plan. Adermann, four years older than McEwen, did not seem a suitable successor. McEwen pushed him out of the deputy leadership after the 1966 election in favour of the much younger Anthony. At McEwen’s further urging, and in recognition of his wife’s poor health, Adermann the following year also stood down from his portfolio, with Anthony again succeeding him. Adermann was appointed KBE in 1971 and retired from politics at the 1972 election. His son Evan succeeded him as member for Fisher; subsequently, as a minister in the government of Malcolm Fraser, he was responsible for the granting of self-government to the Northern Territory.

‘Tall, lean and suntanned’ (*Bulletin* 1959, 14), Adermann was a teetotaler and non-smoker, a dedicated community worker, and a life member of Kingaroy Rotary Club. In retirement he enjoyed playing lawn bowls and watching Test cricket, sometimes in the company of Menzies. He died on 9 May 1979 at his daughter’s house at Dalby in the Darling Downs region of Queensland, and was survived by his wife and their two sons and two daughters. His funeral at Taabinga cemetery, Kingaroy, was attended by Anthony as acting prime minister and by Bjelke-Petersen as premier. Clyde Cameron, not known for insincerely praising political adversaries, judged Adermann to have displayed not ‘even a streak of meanness in his makeup’ (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1979, 1987) and to have possessed a livelier sense of humour than he was commonly credited with. The Labor leader and fellow Queenslander Bill Hayden, who had not been in parliament when Adermann was Chairman of Committees, added that he was ‘one of the most highly regarded parliamentarians to have held this post over the past forty years’ (H.R. Deb. 9.5.1979, 1987). McMahon recalled Adermann’s determination to teach him how to pick peanuts. In his last speech to parliament Adermann had reflected that ‘when the Press or other media or any person denigrates Parliament or when members of Parliament act with less dignity than they should ... something is taken away from that right which is ours in a democracy to accept the rule of the people through Parliament and so give a fair, equitable and just decision of law’ (H.R. Deb. 26.10.1972, 3367).

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