

Bamford, Frederick William: Chairman of Committees 1923–1925

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Frederick William Bamford (1849–1934), publican, politician, and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 11 February 1849 at Dubbo, New South Wales, son of Frederick William Bamford, builder and publican, and his wife, Mary Ann, née McKay. He was educated to primary level at Drayton, near Toowoomba, Queensland, where his family lived from 1854. Apprenticed to a carpenter at the age of fourteen, Fred worked for nearly twenty years around Toowoomba, where he married Irish-born Mary Ann Miller on 7 September 1871.

Bamford and a partner began a cabinet-making and carpentry business at Mackay, Queensland, in July 1882. The firm foundered the following year and he was declared insolvent in April 1884. In September 1885, he was employed as an inspector of railway bridges at Cairns and was discharged from bankruptcy in November. Transferred to Bowen in 1888, in July 1892 he was among many railway employees who lost their jobs due to government financial cutbacks. He then edited the *Observer* newspaper and became licensee of the Sportsman's Arms early in 1894. In December 1895, he helped form a local branch of the left-leaning Democratic League and was its candidate for the Legislative Assembly seat of Bowen in the Queensland general election of April 1896, only to be defeated narrowly. Taking over the Railway Hotel, he became local secretary of the Licensed Victuallers' Association and joined the Chamber of Commerce. In 1897 he was elected to the municipal council and the following year became mayor of Bowen (1898–99). In March 1899, he again stood unsuccessfully for state parliament, this time under the tag of 'Independent Labour'. He moved to Townsville in July 1899, worked as a journalist, and established a short-lived weekly 'democratic newspaper', *The Tribune*, but by early 1901 he had returned to Bowen.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

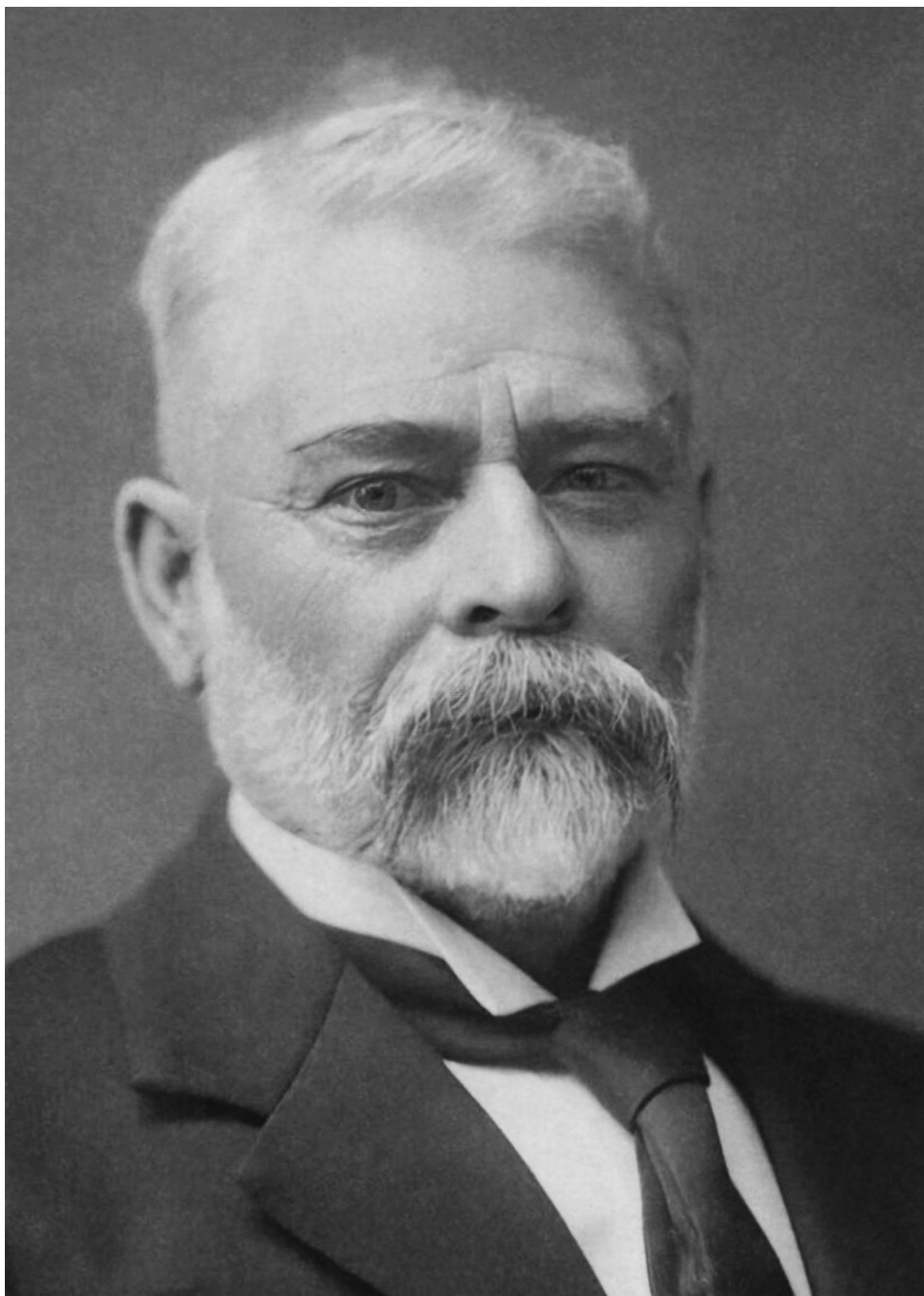


Figure 6: Frederick Bamford.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/5434 #PIC/5434, Swiss Studios Melbourne.

In 1901 Bamford was the Australian Labor Party (ALP) candidate for the seat of Herbert at the first Commonwealth general election. The most prominent issue throughout Queensland was the immigration and employment of non-Europeans, and he campaigned vigorously against Pacific Island labour, as well as the presence of Japanese, Chinese, and Malays. He won the seat narrowly and somewhat unexpectedly with 51.6 per cent of the vote. Later he claimed, rather implausibly, that his election was decisive in the national adoption of the White Australia policy, 'as Sir Edmund Barton was inclined to wobble until the [sic] Herbert returned a White Australian' (*Townsville Daily Bulletin* 1914, 5). In subsequent elections, Bamford consolidated his hold on the seat, peaking at 64 per cent of the vote in 1914.

In parliament, Bamford's main contributions concerned immigration, defence, and the sugar industry. He spoke briefly during 1901 in support of the immigration restriction bill and at greater length on the Pacific Island labourers bill. Parliament passed both easily, the latter being particularly significant for Bamford's electorate as it ended Pacific Island labour recruitment and authorised the deportation of the great majority of Islanders. He thus established himself as a leading proponent of a strict White Australia policy, describing the replacement of coloured labour on the sugar fields with white workers as the 'great experiment in which we are at present engaged' (H.R. Deb. 13.12.1905, 6832). A keen advocate for the sugar industry as the cornerstone of white settlement and development in north Queensland, he supported government tariff protection and assistance for sugar production. This won him the backing of both farmers and workers—the key to his long-term electoral success. Bamford's causes also included 'unification'—the centralisation of Australian legislative power in the federal parliament—and the abolition of state governments. In September 1910, as a private member, he introduced the Constitution Alteration (Unification) Bill, but did not gain the support needed for it to proceed.

As a friend of the ALP luminary William Morris Hughes, Bamford served as vice-president of the Waterside Workers' Federation from 1902 to 1916 while Hughes was its president. This involvement stemmed simply from convenience; with the exception of the general secretary, all members of its executive were Labor members of parliament, able to meet at Parliament House in Melbourne. His more conventional parliamentary service included membership of royal commissions on old-age pensions (1906) and on Tasmanian customs leakage (1911). He served on a Joint Select Committee on Privilege in 1908 and was appointed as a Temporary Chairman of Committees in 1911. Also in 1911, he instigated and subsequently chaired the royal commission on the pearl-shelling industry, which was appointed with the goal of ending the employment of non-European divers, mainly Japanese. Its interim report in 1913 floated ideas to achieve this aim, though in 1916 the final report acknowledged the impracticality of doing so. He later chaired the royal commission on mail services and trade development between Australia and the New Hebrides (1915).

In the chamber, Bamford was a well-read and informed debater, with a genial disposition. But in December 1912 he took offence when the *Melbourne Age* described an amendment he had moved concerning an electoral redistribution in Queensland as 'a political dodge' (1912, 11). He successfully moved that members protect themselves from future such 'aspersions and misrepresentations' (H.R. Deb. 20.12.1912, 7687) by banning representatives of the newspaper from the precincts of parliament until it had published his explanation. His speeches tended to extravagant rhetoric, such as when he denounced the 'measureless magnitude of magnificent mendacity' of the conservative press (H.R. Deb. 4.9.1913, 888).

During World War I, the conscription issue split the ALP and the nation, marking a turning point in Bamford's career. In July 1915, he urged conscription for overseas service, and later boasted that he was the first member of the House to have done so openly. Although in 1902 he had opposed the South African War, he believed that Australian security depended on loyalty to Britain and the vigorous prosecution of the war in Europe. Conscription was also a matter of 'democratic principle' as it 'would put all men on an equal footing' (*Daily Mercury* 1916, 3). Yet a clear majority in the ALP was firmly opposed to conscription, with the result that he was expelled from the party's Queensland branch on 30 October 1916. He was among the twenty-three Labor parliamentarians who followed Prime Minister Hughes out of caucus, and he became minister for home affairs in the National Labor government from November 1916 to February 1917, before returning to the backbench when the newly formed Nationalist Party took office.

Although the ALP hoped to win back Herbert from the now Nationalist member, Bamford continued to hold the seat, albeit with reduced margins—the result of his widespread popularity and his earnest support of sugar interests. He served on the War Certificates Council, which was appointed to raise funds for the war effort (1917–20). In parliament, he now spoke infrequently, though in July 1923 one of his longest speeches criticised his own party's policy on the sugar industry. Respect for Bamford's age and parliamentary service and his still being on friendly terms with former colleagues in the ALP saw him appointed Chairman of Committees on 28 February 1923. His service in this office was unremarkable. He was reasonably efficient and impartial, firmly reminding speakers not to stray from the topic under debate. The opposition sometimes dissented from his rulings and implied that he wrongly cut debate short to favour the government, including an occasion when he became so flustered that the opposition leader Matthew Charlton concluded simply that 'the Chairman is carrying too heavy a load' (H.R. Deb. 27.6.1923, 385). But even after another such incident in July 1924, the press still wrote approvingly of Bamford's 'wonderful fortitude' and 'easy placid temper' (*Daily Telegraph* 1924, 6).

Bamford retired from parliament at the election of November 1925. While opposing politicians are typically generous in their tributes on such occasions, ALP members were especially effusive. To Frank Anstey, the ALP member for Bourke, he represented 'the most gentlemanly type of individual that enters the public life of this country' (H.R. Deb. 23.9.1925, 2668). The outgoing Speaker, William Watt, declared that to know Bamford 'was not merely to admire him, but also to love him' (H.R. Deb. 23.9.1925, 2675). The *Brisbane Telegraph* added that it was rare for someone who had switched parties to still 'earn such high encomiums' on his retirement (1925, 8). He would not have regretted retiring before the opening of the new parliament building in Canberra, for he was 'opposed to the whole thing, lock, stock and barrel' (H.R. Deb. 14.5.1924, 618). By his mid-seventies, Bamford had become an avuncular figure, esteemed for his 'pleasant, benign face, with its pointed white beard' (*Daily Telegraph* 1924, 6). His wife, Mary, had died in 1914, and in 1921 he married Amelia Jane Hamilton in Sydney. They lived there until his death on 10 September 1934. He was cremated at Rookwood crematorium, survived by three sons and two daughters from his first marriage.

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