

Bell, Sir George John: Speaker 1934–1940

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Sir George John Bell (1872–1944), soldier, grazier, and ninth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 29 November 1872 at Sale, Victoria, eldest son of George Bell, a farmer born in Cambridgeshire, England, and his Irish-born wife, Catherine, née Hussey. George's mother died when he was five and his father, with five young children, soon remarried and had a further ten children. George attended state schools in Moe, Tanjil, and Sale.

In 1892 Bell enlisted with the Victorian Mounted Rifles and, on the outbreak of the South African War in 1899, enlisted as a private in the 1st Victorian Mounted Infantry Company, which joined the Australian Regiment at Cape Town in November. The regiment undertook reconnaissance in the Orange Free State and frequently skirmished with the enemy. He took part in the Bastard's Nek and Pink Hill engagements and served with the unit until its disbandment in April 1900. The Victorian Mounted Infantry was then attached to the 4th Mounted Corps of the Imperial Army and fought at Mafeking, Johannesburg, and Diamond Hill. By December, he was back in Australia, but when the British called for reinforcements in February 1901, he re-enlisted as a lieutenant in the 5th Victorian (Mounted Rifles) Contingent. On 4 January 1902, he was severely wounded at Bakkop. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and mentioned in dispatches.

After the war Bell settled in north-western Tasmania and, in 1904, took up selections of land at Henrietta and Parrawe. In April 1905, he resigned his commission in the 10th Light Horse Regiment and became an honorary captain in the Commonwealth Military Forces, backdated to 1 January 1902. By 1906 he had two cattle-grazing properties, but early in February his home and stock were destroyed by 'one great sea of flames' (*North Western Advocate* 1906, 5). He rebuilt quickly, and within three years his holdings were prospering. A leading advocate for his district, he was a member of the Yolla Road Trust and chairman of the Yolla Cricket Club. He helped form a branch of the anti-socialist Tasmanian Liberal League at Yolla and in 1910 was elected to its state council.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 9: George Bell.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

On 25 August 1914, Bell enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force as a second lieutenant in the 3rd Light Horse Regiment and sailed for Egypt in October. He was promoted to lieutenant in February 1915 and, from May to November, served at Gallipoli. Transferred to the Suez Canal zone, he was promoted to captain on 8 February 1916 and major on 15 April. He participated in the early stages of the Sinai campaign, fighting at the Romani battle on 4 August and in abortive advances on Katia and Bir el Abd. Attached as second in command to the 4th Camel Regiment, Imperial Camel Corps Brigade, he saw action in October during the occupation of El Arish. He rejoined the light horse at Bir el Abd in March 1917.

Promoted to lieutenant-colonel in June 1917, Bell was given command of the 3rd Light Horse Regiment and soon emerged as 'one of the most aggressive and astute leaders produced by the light horse' (Blackwell 1950, 55). He demanded from his men the same discipline that he imposed on himself, but was respected for his fairness, coolness, and anticipation of the enemy's moves. The regiment played a spirited role in the battle of Beersheba, participated in the capture of the Jordan Valley, and on 10 February 1918, took Jericho without opposition. His chief contribution was during the advance on Amman when he led an attack on Es Salt—the Turks withdrawing from this vital stronghold without fighting. The later evacuation of British troops from Es Salt was largely due to his tactical astuteness. He was mentioned in dispatches by General Sir Edmund Allenby and in April was appointed CMG.

Throughout the final stages of the war, Bell remained in the Amman area. In August 1918, he came down with malaria, which was to recur after the war. On 10 December, while he was in Cairo, some men from his regiment participated—with other Australian, New Zealand, and British troops—in the Surafend incident in which a number of Arabs from the village were massacred after a Bedouin thief killed a New Zealander. He held an inquiry on 12–13 December, but no soldier was charged and the findings were not made public. This did not stop his superiors from judging him in February 1919 to be the regimental commander 'best qualified' in the ANZAC Mounted Division 'to command a brigade' (NAA B2455).

Demobilised in September 1919, on 5 November at the Yolla Anglican Mission Hall, Bell married Ellen Rothwell, daughter of John Edward Rothwell, a local grazier, and his wife, Ellen Rothwell. His broad appeal as a well-known local man on the land with an impressive war record led to his being proposed as an 'anti-Labor candidate' (*Advocate* 8 October 1919, 3) in the coming federal election by the Returned Soldiers' League and the Farmers and Stockholders Association. He agreed to stand as the Nationalist Party candidate for the Tasmanian seat of Darwin, but he reserved 'the right of free criticism of the administration of Commonwealth affairs' (*Advocate* 8 October 1919, 3). His campaign appealed to a largely rural electorate by condemning government extravagance and the favouring of 'the crowds of workers in the cities' (*Advocate* 24 November 1919, 3). With the crucial support of returned

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servicemen in the Labor stronghold of Queenstown, Bell narrowly defeated the Labor candidate and future prime minister Joseph Lyons, who nonetheless became a close friend.

At the 1922 election, Bell withstood approaches to join the Country Party. His rural sympathies did not prevent his defeat at the hands of the Country Party candidate Joshua Whitsitt on Labor Party preferences. (Sir) Earle Page later claimed that Bell lost his seat for failing to fulfil a pledge to vote with the Country Party against the Hughes government's budget (Page 1963, 69). Bell regained Darwin in 1925 and retained it with comfortable majorities at the next six elections, the last four as a United Australia Party (UAP) candidate.

In parliament Bell drew attention to inadequate national defence and support for ex-servicemen. He was labelled a militarist for advocating universal military training and for his stand against disarmament. As a proponent of Tasmania, he supported mining development and sawmilling, becoming 'one of the most able debaters in the House of Representatives' (*Advocate* 1928, 5). He was awarded the Volunteer Officers' Decoration in 1925 and in 1927 was appointed aide-de-camp to the governor-general. In March 1927, he relinquished command of the 26th Light Horse Regiment—a post he had held since 1920. He suffered a personal tragedy in October 1927 when his brother William Robert, a district officer in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, was assassinated.

Bell was not considered for a ministry when the Lyons government was formed following the December 1931 federal election, but his leadership experience and independence suited a presiding officer's role. In 1932 the choice of a new Speaker had seldom been 'more open' (*Telegraph* 1932, 1). Seeking to embarrass the government, the Country and Labor parties considered Bell, but he refused to stand against the UAP nominee, George Mackay. He was instead elected Chairman of Committees—effectively, Deputy Speaker—despite not having served as a Temporary Chairman as was the usual practice. He received encomiums from his own party and Labor leader James Scullin, and also from the Lang Labor leader, Jack Beasley, who ominously urged Bell to 'exercise wise discretion in allowing latitude' to members in the committee stages of bills (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1932, 37). In practice, the lingering bitterness of some Labor and Lang Labor members following the split in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the defection of Lyons soon made Bell's job difficult.

The first of several altercations occurred during the November 1932 debate on the Ottawa Agreement Bill, when Labor members deluged Postmaster-General Archdale Parkhill with interjections. Amid scenes 'unprecedented in the annals of the Federal Parliament' (*Brisbane Courier* 1932, 13), Bell lost control of the House until he named the deputy Labor leader, Frank Forde. During 1933 Bell's impartiality was questioned. In April Scullin declared his having named two Labor members and suspending one of them while taking no action against government members to be

‘the greatest outrage that I have known in this Parliament’ (H.R. Deb. 5.4.1933, 867). Bell was also accused of curtailing debate at government direction. In October he acted on the advice of the assistant treasurer, Richard (Baron) Casey, in ruling out of order amendments to old-age and invalid pensions proposed by the member for East Sydney, the Langite Eddie Ward. Beasley condemned Bell as ‘the mouthpiece of Government’ (H.R. Deb. 19.10.1933, 3705) but his motion of dissent was defeated on party lines.

When Mackay resigned at the 1934 election, Bell’s popularity within the UAP and support from Lyons made him the likely new Speaker. But when on 23 October the UAP member for Indi, William Hutchinson, moved that Bell be elected Speaker and described him as a Chairman of Committees known for ‘absolute impartiality’ (H.R. Deb. 23.10.1934, 18), the chamber erupted into ‘a bear garden’ (*Catholic Freeman’s Journal* 1934, 20). The Lang Labor member for Reid, Joseph Gander, followed a filibustering attack on the government by nominating himself as Speaker. Opposition members refused to co-operate with the Clerk of the House, Ernest William Parkes, in conducting the vote, despite which Bell was declared duly elected. As the new Speaker was being escorted to the chair, Gander also approached the chair, and opposition members unsuccessfully called for a vote on the two candidates (H.R. Deb. 23.10.1934, 27–28).

Former Speaker Norman Makin observed that in manner and temperament Bell resembled his immediate predecessor and was restrained in his calls for order. Although the return of Lang Labor to the ALP fold in 1936 and John Curtin’s moderating leadership helped make the parliament less raucous, Bell continued to clash with opposition members—notably, Ward and the member for Hunter, Rowland James. The Surafend inquiry resurfaced during 1936 when A. S. Mulhall, a former light horseman who claimed to have witnessed the bloody aftermath of the massacre, wrote separately to Bell and Sir George Pearce, who had been minister for defence during the war, attempting to clear his fellow light horsemen of culpability. Mulhall was disregarded without damage to Bell’s reputation.

Don Rodgers of the Lang-controlled *Labor Daily* described Bell’s parliamentary rulings as ‘totally unsubtle, delivered with the heavy sweep of the cavalry sabre’ (Rodgers 1937, 10). But Bell was also prepared to upset his own side of politics. In September 1937, Ward accused the government of appropriating £250,000 from public revenue ‘to give special privileges and concessions to private individuals’ (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1937, 953) interested in searching for oil. When Lyons demanded that Ward withdraw this assertion, Bell ruled against his own prime minister on the basis that the allegation was ‘no more than a reflection on the administration of the Minister’ (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1937, 954). Lyons successfully moved that this ruling be ‘disagreed with’ (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1937, 955), but when Ward refused to withdraw his claim, Bell named him and he was suspended on the further motion of the prime minister. When the Labor member for Darling, Joseph Clark, suggested

that the prime minister himself owned shares in oil companies, Bell refused Lyons's request for a withdrawal because the statement was 'of a political nature and not necessarily personal' (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1937, 956). As dissent from a ruling by the Speaker was reasonably common and provided for in the standing orders, Bell did not contemplate resignation. But it was 'without precedent in the history of the Federal Parliament' (*Mercury* 1937, 7) for the Speaker's ruling to be reversed on the motion of a prime minister.

A few days later, Attorney-General (Sir) Robert Menzies introduced amendments to the standing orders for election of a Speaker, which had been initiated by Bell as chair of the Standing Orders Committee two years earlier, to avoid the disorder that marred his own election. This brought a split among Labor members. Beasley, a member of the committee, sought more time to discuss changes that affected 'the privilege, right and freedom of honorable members' (H.R. Deb. 15.9.1937, 1138). He thought it wrong to impose a five minute limit for speaking on the qualities of candidates while not limiting speeches congratulating a new Speaker. Although he accepted the introduction of a secret ballot, he opposed ballot papers being given to the Clerk for counting without scrutineers representing the candidates. But the Labor member for Bourke, Maurice Blackburn, a former Speaker in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, revealed that he had urged the government to introduce the amendments in time for the election of a new Speaker that would follow the imminent general election. A secret ballot would ensure that the Speaker would be 'the choice of the House' (H.R. Deb. 15.9.1937, 1143). The amendments were passed. It also emerged that not all Labor members found Bell disagreeable. Blackburn assured Bell that he had 'discharged the duties of your high office with absolute impartiality and very high ability indeed' (H.R. Deb. 15.9.1937, 1144). Before parliament adjourned, the affable Lyons praised Bell's 'impartiality', as demonstrated by their 'recent disagreement' (H.R. Deb. 15.9.1937, 1147). He replied: 'I would not be human had I always been right and honorable members would not be human had they thought that I was always right' (H.R. Deb. 15.9.1937, 1151).

Longstanding health problems had put a question mark over whether Bell would remain Speaker, but following the general election of November 1937, he was the only candidate. He continued to strive for impartiality. In June 1938, when the acting minister for commerce, Archie Cameron, described the independent member for Wimmera, Alexander Wilson, as a 'clean-skin' on the opposition benches, Wilson demanded he withdraw this remark as offensive. Cameron refused and was named by Bell. This placed Lyons in a position he believed 'no Prime Minister has previously faced' (H.R. Deb. 15.6.1938, 2129). On his motion, Cameron became the first minister to be suspended from federal parliament.

Bell's preparedness to enforce standing orders even when embarrassing to the government led to the first occasion that a member was named but the motion to suspend failed. During an acrimonious exchange in October 1938 between the UAP

member for Macquarie, John Lawson, and James over what had supposedly been said about the location of a plant to extract oil from coal, Bell refused to accept an apology from James. The motion to suspend James was defeated 24 votes to 19 due to government members having absented themselves to catch trains home (VP 1937–38/223, 14.10.1938).

The following month, Bell suffered a further blow to his authority in yet another ‘extraordinary scene believed to be unparalleled in the history of the Parliament’ (*Mercury* 1938, 17). During debate on the Ministers of State Bill, the UAP member for Barton, Albert Lane, attacked the Country Party for having too much say in the formation of cabinets and lamented the underrepresentation of New South Wales. Lane ignored Bell’s warning that he should focus on the bill, whereupon he was ordered to resume his seat. The Labor member for Batman, Frank Brennan, took advantage of the standing orders, as confirmed by Bell, to move that Lane be given leave to continue his speech, which was agreed to on the voices.

At the end of the fifteenth parliament in August 1940, both Prime Minister Menzies and Curtin praised the manner in which Bell had discharged his duties. He responded that he could not have done the job without the Clerk of the House, another Tasmanian, Frank Green. Bell announced that he would not nominate as Speaker after the election of 1940 as, now that Australia was again at war, he preferred to be ‘free to join in every discussion when he thought his views should be expressed freely’ (*Advocate* 1940, 5). Despite an increase in Burnie’s industrial population, he defeated his Labor opponent, the future premier of Tasmania, Eric Reece, by nearly five thousand votes.

In March 1941, King George VI approved Bell’s post-Speakership retention of the title ‘Honourable’ and in June he was appointed KCMG. During his final term in parliament, he pursued Tasmanian interests by serving on committees inquiring into the Apple and Pear Marketing Board and the state’s economic position in wartime. Still troubled by poor health, he retired in 1943 and, on 5 March 1944, died of coronary vascular disease. Buried in Burnie Anglican cemetery after a state funeral, he was survived by his wife, three sons, and two daughters.

On hearing of Bell’s death, Prime Minister Curtin spoke of his ‘strict sense of impartiality’ (H.R. Deb. 7.3.1944, 1016). Dame Enid Lyons, who succeeded Bell as member for Darwin, described his ‘personal rectitude’ as having been worn as ‘a shining armour of stainless integrity’ (H.R. Deb. 7.3.1944, 1018). Tall and well built, he was known as a man of courage and determination, with a stern visage that belied a retiring manner. His portrait by Max Meldrum, which won the 1939 Archibald Prize, is held by Parliament House.

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