

Blake, Douglas Maurice (Doug): Clerk 1982–1985

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Douglas Maurice Blake (1925–2022), eleventh Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 25 October 1925 at Campsie, Sydney, son of locally born Elsie Isobel Blake and her husband, Maurice, an instructor at Gosford Training School. Having gained his Intermediate Certificate at De La Salle College, Ashfield, Doug worked as a clerk. Volunteering for service in World War II, he enlisted on 30 November 1942 in the Royal Australian Navy. He was employed as a coder at HMAS Cerberus, before being promoted to midshipman, RAN Reserve, in October 1943. From December, he served in the corvette HMAS *Cowra*, which escorted convoys and carried out patrols in the South-West Pacific Area. In 1945 he was promoted to acting sub-lieutenant and posted in June to the shore establishment HMAS *Madang* (at Madang, New Guinea) for the Naval Beach Unit. Returning to Sydney in September, he was demobilised on 11 October.

Blake was again a clerk in Sydney before arriving in Canberra in 1949 as a member of the Attorney-General's Department, and subsequently briefly worked in the departments of commerce and agriculture, and treasury. He lived initially at Gorman House hostel, Braddon, before marrying Patricia Fox, a member of a local family, on 6 May 1950, at St Christopher's Pro-Cathedral, Manuka. They were to have six girls and a boy. Appointed to the Department of the House of Representatives in September 1950 as Accounts Clerk, Blake found his first sight of (Sir) Robert Menzies and Ben Chifley 'pretty awe-inspiring' (*The House Magazine* 1985, 3). In November 1951, he had the honour of taking into safekeeping the new mace gifted by the British House of Commons as part of the jubilee celebrations of the Commonwealth of Australia, prior to its formal presentation to the House of Representatives by a delegation of British parliamentarians.

In May 1954, Blake became Reading Clerk and, in August 1955, Clerk of the Records and Assistant Clerk of Committees. He progressed to Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees in February 1958, and Third Clerk Assistant in February 1959. In 1964, at the request of the Clerk of the House, (Sir) Alan Turner, Blake and his colleague

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 12: Doug Blake.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

John (Jack) Pettifer produced a report on the organisation and staffing arrangements of the Department of the House of Representatives. Endorsed by the Speaker, Sir John McLeay, the report led to a major restructure, including the redesignation of the Clerk Assistant position as Deputy Clerk. Blake became Second Clerk Assistant in August 1970. He spent three months on exchange to the House of Commons in 1972 and, following his return to Canberra, was promoted to First Clerk Assistant in May 1973.

The most distinctive feature of Blake's career as a parliamentary officer was the professional support he provided to new and developing legislatures. In August 1964, he had visited Port Moresby to assist the new House of Assembly of Papua and New Guinea. He returned frequently over following years to conduct workshops for parliamentary staff and advise parliamentarians. In Canberra, he hosted training visits by Papua New Guinea parliamentary staff and, in 1977, the government of Papua New Guinea awarded him the Independence Medal. He was appointed in 1974 to a committee, chaired by Gordon Scholes, to recommend procedures for the incipient Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly. Blake accompanied the Commonwealth parliamentary delegation to Darwin for the formal ceremonies for the granting of self-government to the Northern Territory on 1 July 1978, having chosen the dispatch boxes to be presented to the new Legislative Assembly by the Commonwealth parliament.

Early in 1977, Blake became Deputy Clerk and, following Pettifer's retirement, Clerk of the House, on 16 July 1982. At the end of that year, he commissioned the first major review of the organisation and staffing of the Department of the House of Representatives since his own in 1964. This was in response to a series of significant developments that included the introduction in 1982 of separate appropriation bills for the parliamentary departments; provision in the Public Service Acts Amendment Act 1982 for more parliamentary autonomy in staffing arrangements—notably, by enabling the Speaker to appoint and promote departmental officers (other than the Clerk) without Executive Council approval; and the acquisition of functions previously managed by executive agencies, such as contributions to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and hospitality for visiting school groups. The review was completed in March 1983. Immediate changes included strengthening the Deputy Clerk positions as support for the head of the department, and the transfer of some functions from the Table Office to a separate Bills and Papers Office. Management services previously handled by the Serjeant-at-Arms's Office, together with finance and personnel responsibilities, were transferred to a new Resource Management Office, which 'became the main administrative arm of the Department' (DHR, *Annual Report 1983–84*, 37).

During Blake's Clerkship, the parliamentary departments were increasingly concerned with planning the move to the new Parliament House. In anticipation, in June 1984, he made a written submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings advocating the creation of a parliamentary television unit. He also argued that the old House should become a museum of parliamentary history, but that the historic Speaker's chair, presented in 1926 by the Empire Parliamentary Association, should be moved to the new parliament, 'even if I have to carry it there on my back' (Longhurst 1983). Despite the former Clerks Pettifer and Norman Parkes joining him in a petition to the House of Representatives, the chair stayed put.

Blake retired on 30 July 1985. In the House of Representatives, seventeen members, from all parties, paid tribute to his service to the parliament. Some, including John Howard, recalled the personal help he had provided when they first entered parliament; others raised his 'most important contribution to the depth and quality of the relationship between our nearest neighbor, Papua New Guinea, and this country' (H.R. Deb. 23.5.1985, 3077–78). The former Speaker Gordon Scholes stated his approval that 'friendly banter' (H.R. Deb. 23.5.1985, 3076) between members and parliamentary officers had become commonplace under Blake, reflecting a more relaxed atmosphere in the House. The Speaker, Harry Jenkins, said that he and Blake had

developed the rapport which is essential between a Clerk of the House and the Speaker. At times, I must admit, it becomes almost a mind reading exercise. When a point is raised we are able to look at one another and the guidance is gained (H.R. Deb. 23.5.1985, 3073).

In September 1950, Blake had resumed his naval service by joining the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve and, in 1968, he reached the rank of commander. He became president of the Navy League of Australia (Australian Capital Territory) in 1976, receiving the Volunteer Reserve Officer Decoration (VRD). A deep personal commitment to the Catholic Church led him to assist in the building of the O'Donnell Youth Centre in Braddon, and of St Brigid's Church in Dickson, opened in 1978.

Blake was particularly well known locally for his involvement with rugby union. He played first grade for Canberra Royals (1950–52) and was a member of Australian Capital Territory representative teams. From 1952, he served as a referee in more than two hundred first-grade games, including nine grand finals and international contests with the New Zealand All Blacks, the South African Springboks, the British Lions, and others. Coaching teams drawn from parliamentarians also fell to him, including one known as the Triangle Terrors. In 1971 he was made a life member of the Australian Capital Territory Rugby Referees Association. Blake's retirement as Clerk was brought forward by one day so he could referee an Australian Capital Territory–Fiji rugby match, on 31 July 1985.

In retirement, Blake worked for the St Vincent de Paul Society, was a member of the Holy Name Society, undertook a lay ministry, and chaired the Braddon Parish Council. He was appointed AM in the 1986 Australia Day Honours for service to the parliament and was personally invested by the Queen at Government House, Canberra, on 3 March 1986. Blake died on 20 December 2022, survived by Patricia and six of their seven children.

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