

Browning, Alan Robert: Clerk 1985–1991

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Alan Robert Browning (1928–2004), twelfth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 25 October 1928 in Canberra, fourth child of George Victor Browning, public servant, and his wife Olive, née Barrand, both Victorian born. After attending Canberra High School and achieving first-class honours in Japanese at the Leaving Certificate examination, Alan joined the Department of the Interior as a clerk (third division) in 1946. Later that year, his interest in Japan prompted him to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (Interim Army, from 1947), and to undertake intensive language training at the Royal Australian Air Force School of Languages at Point Cook, Victoria. Between 1947 and 1949, he served in Japan as an interpreter, working for a number of Australian, British Commonwealth, and United States organisations charged with transforming the country into a non-militarised parliamentary democracy.

In 1949 Browning returned to the Department of the Interior in Canberra, where he also became a locally prominent sportsman. He played Australian Rules football for Ainslie and represented the Australian Capital Territory in baseball; in later life, he played A-grade squash, tennis, and golf. On 7 September 1951, he married Barbara June Linton, a public servant originally from Western Australia, at the Presbyterian Church of St Andrew, Canberra. They were to have two sons and two daughters. In August 1954, he was appointed Reading Clerk in the Department of the House of Representatives. Swift promotion followed, to the posts of Clerk of the Papers and Accountant (August 1955), Clerk of the Papers (October 1956), and Deputy Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of the Records (March 1958).

In January 1959, Browning became Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees. One of his administrative responsibilities was ensuring the efficient running of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, which drew him into a recurrent issue of limiting its use by ministerial staff who found it a convenient vantage point during peak sitting times. As Serjeant-at-Arms, he also served for some years as Secretary to the Joint Committee on the Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings. He saw

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 14: Alan Browning.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

an ‘overriding justification’ (Browning 1966, 84) in a democracy for continuing to broadcast parliament by radio, despite concerns about its influence on debate. His publication *Broadcasting of Parliamentary Proceedings in Australia* (1968) was followed by a history of *The Mace* (1970), along with numerous discussion papers on parliamentary practice, prepared for the Speaker and members.

Browning became Senior Parliamentary Officer in March 1969 and Clerk Assistant in December 1971. His marriage was dissolved and, on 1 May 1976, at Sydney, he married Elizabeth Marsden Hicks. In January 1977, he was appointed First Clerk Assistant. Between 1979 and 1980, he was also Clerk of the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly, attending sittings when it met during the ‘up’ week between sessions of the House of Representatives. As the assembly’s first Clerk, he was required to establish its basic machinery, including drafting the standing orders. In Canberra, he was a strong advocate of reforms to address pressures arising from the rapid expansion of the Department of the House of Representatives. Browning’s exhortations eventually prompted the Speaker, (Sir) Billy Snedden, early in 1977 to authorise a review of departmental operations, which led to the introduction during 1978–79 of extensive personnel and staff-training reforms. Browning was secretary to the Australian delegation at Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conferences held in Trinidad and Tobago (1969), Jamaica (1978), and Fiji (1981). He made a significant contribution to the editing and production of the first edition of *House of Representatives Practice* (1981), earning him a place as one of two assistant editors of this major procedural and historical work.

In September 1982, Browning became one of two Deputy Clerks of the House of Representatives and, on 31 July 1985, Clerk of the House. For House members and staff, the following six years were exceptionally productive. The passing of the Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987 clarified the nature of the powers, privileges, and immunities of the houses, their members, and committees. Browning was a longstanding advocate of a comprehensive House of Representatives committee system empowered to report on the operations of Commonwealth agencies, and other aspects of public policy: ‘governments do take notice of the committee reports’ (Browning 1989), he concluded. He was convinced of the great potential of committees for improving governance, having been Secretary to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Voting Rights of Aborigines (1961), the first such scrutiny committee appointed since 1929. Largely in response to backbench pressure, a system of eight general-purpose standing committees was established in September 1987. This, and the concomitant expansion of the functions of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, enabled the House of Representatives to scrutinise the operations of all Commonwealth entities. Browning was later described in the House as having been ‘integrally involved’ in this major development, such as by providing ‘careful advice about the structure of the new committee system’ (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2053).

As the last Clerk of the House to serve in the provisional Parliament House, Browning was closely involved in organising the move to the new building and its official opening by Queen Elizabeth II on 9 May 1988. Browning also oversaw arrangements for the thirty-fourth Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, held in Canberra in September 1988. He edited the second edition of *House of Representatives Practice* (1989), which was reviewed as 'a worthy successor to the original enterprise' (MacDonagh 1991). Of the finished publication, he said: 'I accept it as a duty and have found it a pleasure and a privilege to promote one of the world's strongest democracies through this project' (Browning 1989, vii–viii). He was also 'responsible for a review of the standing orders being conducted by House Officers' (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2048), which contributed to a comprehensive examination of the standing orders that the House Standing Committee on Procedure began in 1989.

On 22 March 1991, Browning retired as Clerk of the House. The twenty-six members who provided farewell tributes—including Prime Minister Bob Hawke; the leader of the opposition, John Hewson; and the Speaker, Leo McLeay—emphasised the impressive number and variety of Browning's contributions to significant 'innovations and improvements' in House procedures (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2041). The manager of opposition business, Wal Fife, said Browning's written contributions on subjects as varied as electronic voting, division procedures, and the airing in parliament of matters that were sub judice 'will probably not be surpassed for many years, and it is a list that reflects great credit on the professionalism, the dedication and the determination of our retiring Clerk' (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2048). Kim Beazley recalled that, as a child watching from the public gallery, he thought Browning, in his role as Serjeant-at-Arms, 'at once looked highly ceremonial and slightly dangerous' (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2043). Browning responded—through the Speaker—that he had realised all of the goals he had set for himself as Clerk and was leaving 'with an undiminished faith in the institution of Parliament, believing that Australia now has a vastly superior House of Representatives to that of the 1950s' (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2059). In retirement, he remained physically fit, and a keen sportsman. He died in Canberra on 7 December 2004, survived by his partner, Margie Fitzpatrick, and his four children.

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