

# **Chanter, John Moore: Chairman of Committees 1901–1903, 1914–1922**

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John Moore Chanter (1845–1931), farmer, auctioneer, commission agent, and first Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 11 February 1845 in Adelaide, son of John Chanter, shoemaker, who had migrated from Devonshire, England, in 1840, and his second wife, Elizabeth, née Moore. John senior became a publican in Adelaide and, from 1856, in Melbourne, before he selected land in rural Victoria, at Trentham in 1869 and in 1874 at Rochester. Young John was educated at the Albert House Academy and the Collegiate School of St Peter in Adelaide, and at the Model Training Institution in Melbourne. On 16 November 1863, at Campbell's Creek Primitive Methodist Church, Victoria, he married Mary Ann Clark; they had six sons and four daughters. He became a champion of the selectors' cause and was active in protectionist rural politics, in 1878 becoming the first secretary of the Victorian Farmers' Union.

In 1881 Chanter moved to Moama, New South Wales, where he was an auctioneer and commission agent, winning the trust of local selectors for his preparedness to stand up for their interests. The political career of almost forty years that followed spanned two parliaments and local government. In the colonial parliament of New South Wales, he began as an independent member, then was in the protectionist party and later an early version of the Country Party; in the federal sphere, he was successively a protectionist, Labor, Nationalist, and Nationalist and Farmer member. Yet he was rarely accused of opportunism or betrayal, with each switch between parties being his response to changing party formations rather than marking a change in his political beliefs.

Starting his political life in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly in 1885, Chanter headed the poll as an independent in the two-member seat of Murray. He held his place over the next three elections as a protectionist, becoming a moving

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**Figure 18: John Chanter.**

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/7332 #PIC/7332, Falk, Sydney.

spirit in the assembly's 'country corner'. More prominent as an election campaigner and parliamentarian than as a player in the rough and tumble party politics of colonial New South Wales, he was Secretary for Mines in (Sir) George Dibbs's second ministry, which lasted seven weeks in 1889, with (Sir) Edmund Barton and (Sir) William Lyne as colleagues, but he failed to be selected for later protectionist ministries. He was also the first mayor of Moama (1891–92). After a change to single-member electorates in 1894, he won Deniliquin in three further contests, consistently polling around 70 per cent of the vote. His federal career was presaged by his appointment as a Temporary Chairman of Committees in 1896 and again in 1900. In September 1900, he became the first president of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Natives' Association.

Chanter entered federal politics in 1901 as the member for Riverina. On 5 June 1901, during the opening session of the Commonwealth parliament, he was elected by the House of Representatives as its first Chairman of Committees. His nomination was followed by a short debate marked by an implicit assumption on both sides of the chamber that the experienced Chanter was a sound choice; more words were expended on whether his tenure should be for a single session or for the life of the parliament—an issue that was only fully resolved six years later. His nominator, James McColl, was perhaps expansive in claiming that Chanter had 'on a great number of occasions acted as deputy-chairman' (H.R. Deb. 5.6.1901, 745) in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, but Chanter responded that he was certainly a seasoned parliamentarian who was determined to uphold the 'dignity of the position ... [in] my native land' (H.R. Deb. 5.6.1901, 746). As the free-trade member Patrick Glynn noted, a candidate's eligibility for a presiding officer position was invariably 'tested beforehand privately, and their respective merits or careers are not gone into on the motion that a particular honourable member shall be appointed' (H.R. Deb. 5.6.1901, 746). Chanter was also one of several new Commonwealth parliamentarians, including King O'Malley and James Fowler, who advocated the selection of ministers by parliament rather than by the political party holding a parliamentary majority.

The uncontested appointments of Chanter as Chairman of Committees and of (Sir) Frederick Holder as Speaker also suggested a gesture towards comity by the nascent House of Representatives. Political balance was probably a further consideration given Holder's identification with free trade and the subsequent appointment as Temporary Chairmen of Committees of two Labor members, three free-traders, and one protectionist.

Chanter's first term was notable for his interpreting the Constitution and the standing orders to allow private members speaking in the Committee of Ways and Means to propose new taxes and to increase existing ones. Holder reluctantly upheld

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this interpretation, which remained in place until 1927 when it was overturned by another Chairman of Committees, James Bayley. Chanter retained the Chairmanship in the second session of the first parliament without opposition, despite this ruling.

Were it not for his temporary absence arising from an electoral mishap, Chanter might have contested and held the position again in the second parliament. He lost Riverina at the election of December 1903 by a mere five votes to the free-trade candidate Robert Blackwood. An outraged Chanter claimed electoral irregularities, eventually leading to the outcome being overturned by the High Court and a by-election in May 1904 that he won. This unsettling experience contributed to his advocacy of parliament being made the arbiter of disputed returns, rather than High Court judges, who, he felt, were so absorbed in 'the ordinary forms of legal procedure' as to be prone to 'unconscious bias' (H.R. Deb. 12.12.1905, 6744).

By the time he regained Riverina, Chanter's fellow protectionist Carty Salmon had been elected to replace him as Chairman of Committees. Salmon's original candidature was contested by Labor and, during the second session of this parliament, he was challenged by Chanter himself—indicative not only of a thwarted sense of ownership but also of mounting dissatisfaction with Salmon that eventually saw Labor's Charles McDonald defeat him for the Chairmanship in the third session. Chanter had to wait a considerable time before he was again able to seek election as Chairman. McDonald retained the position at the commencement of the third parliament in 1907 and kept it for the remaining sessions as a result of the post being made tenurable for a whole parliamentary term.

In the July 1909 election for Speaker caused by Holder's untimely death, party passions came to the fore as the government's nominee, Salmon, was opposed by McDonald and then, after long and heated debate, also by Chanter. The compromise nomination of Chanter by the member for Bass, David Storrer, amid what Alfred Deakin called 'a debate of an altogether unprecedented character' (H.R. Deb. 28.7.1909, 1688), did not manage to come to a vote.

Chanter's political direction underwent a major change during 1909. He was one of four protectionists who refused to become part of the new Fusion Party with the free-traders, and the only one who chose to switch to the Australian Labor Party. When Labor won the election of 1910, Chanter was still a recent convert, and so the positions of Speaker and Chairman of Committees went to the party stalwarts McDonald and Alexander Poynton, respectively, but with Chanter being appointed as a Temporary Chairman of Committees for all three sessions of this first McDonald Speakership.

Labor was defeated at the election of 1913, with Chanter losing his seat to the rural Liberal Bert Falkiner. At the double-dissolution election of September 1914, he regained Riverina and Labor returned to government. His re-election as Chairman

of Committees on 9 October was widely acknowledged as being his belated due for the disappointment of 1903. The Liberal leader Joseph Cook made some play that Chanter owed his position to 'the decree of Caucus' but confessed that 'his appointment will not be unwelcome to me' (H.R. Deb. 9.10.1914, 64).

Chanter changed parties yet again in 1917 when the Labor Party split over conscription led to his moving to the new Nationalist Party. He was unopposed for the Chairmanship at the commencement of the seventh parliament in June 1917—his fourth such election by general concurrence. At the general election of December 1919, he was endorsed by both the Nationalist Party and the Farmers and Settlers Association (FSA) of New South Wales. His fifth and last election by the House as Chairman, which followed, was, however, not smooth. Labor nominated William Mahoney against him and, although Chanter defeated him comfortably, 42 votes to 22 (VP 1920/11, 27.2.1920), this followed a long debate and was a direct reflection of party strengths. The Labor leader, Frank Tudor, charged that Chanter had wrongly prevented him from speaking in committee during the previous parliament. The young Labor member Samuel Nicholls remarked that Chanter, who had just turned seventy-five, could 'no longer be relied upon. He has fallen into a condition of senile decay' (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1920, 68). This harsh judgement went unchallenged; party lines had continued to tighten, and the rise of the Country Party raised tensions for a rural Nationalist like Chanter that a weakened Labor Party sought to exploit.

His final term as Chairman was probably Chanter's most difficult, especially during the long first session of February 1920 – December 1921. He was granted three months' leave of absence in May 1920 following the death of his wife but was back in the House by July. That month, the House repudiated his ruling on the point in proceedings at which a motion could be put to the vote, which was at odds with an earlier ruling by the Speaker, Sir William Elliot Johnson (VP 1920/221–22, 28.7.1920). The remainder of 1920 was marked by a series of suspensions of Labor members. When this highly contested parliament ended in November 1922, Chanter was routinely thanked for his services by the government and opposition. His reply was characteristically poised, but he took the opportunity to reflect that the standing orders were 'unfortunately ... incomplete [and] only temporary, although they have been in use for over twenty years', and accordingly suggested that the next parliament should 'revise them and make them so plain as to be thoroughly understood by every member of the House' (H.R. Deb. 12.10.1922, 3929). They proved to be almost the closing words of his parliamentary career. At the election of December 1922, he was overwhelmed in Riverina by a trio of Country Party candidates exchanging preferences. The victor, William Killen, was a recent past president of the FSA that had endorsed Chanter in 1919.

Tall and rugged, Chanter was a quiet man who spoke infrequently in debates but, when he did, explored all details of his subject and held tenaciously to his viewpoint. His unusually long service as Chairman of Committees encompassed major changes

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in Australia's developing political and party systems. In retirement he lived at Caulfield in suburban Melbourne, where he died on 9 March 1931. He was buried in the Anglican section of Brighton cemetery; eight of his ten children survived him.

*This article supplements the original Volume 7 ADB biography, published 1979, authored by G. N. Hawker and Joan Rydon. [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chanter-john-moore-5553/text9467](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chanter-john-moore-5553/text9467)*

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