

Clark, Joseph James (Joe): Chairman of Committees 1946–1949

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Joseph James (Joe) Clark (1897–1992), tailor and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 29 July 1897 at Coonamble, New South Wales, eldest of four children of Joseph Alfred Clark, master tailor, and his wife, Elizabeth Ellen, née Finlay, both New South Wales born. Joe junior was ‘reared in a political atmosphere’ (Clark 1985), for his father was secretary of the local branches of the Australian Workers’ Union and the Australian Labor Party (ALP), an alderman (1902–20) on the Coonamble Municipal Council, and its mayor (1907–08, 1911–13). The younger Clark was educated at St Brigid’s Convent and Coonamble Public schools before being sent to Holy Cross College, Ryde, where he undertook commercial studies and won prizes for shorthand, English history, and geography. As a young man he read the *Australian Worker* and attended political rallies. He joined the ALP aged just sixteen.

In 1915 Clark returned to Coonamble and began an apprenticeship with his father to become a tailor. Disliking the trade and wanting to ‘do better’ (Clark 1985), he also studied engineering by correspondence. He was then articled to a surveyor but after two years contracted pleurisy and was compelled to forgo camping in the bush for work in town. In May 1920, his father was elected member for Wammerawa in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. As the position entailed lengthy stints away from home, Clark took over running the family business. At its peak the firm had shops in Coonamble, Dubbo, Walgett, and Baradine, and employed some thirty hands. He became increasingly active in regional politics, serving as president of the Coonamble branch of the ALP and of the Labor Electoral Council for Castlereagh. Like his father, he was also an alderman (1925–34) on the municipal council, including serving three years as mayor. On 29 January 1927, at St Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney, he married Mary Elizabeth Regan (d. 1961) of Coonamble.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 20: Joe Clark.

Source: *Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook* Tenth Issue, 1945.

During the Depression, Clark was forced to shut all but the Coonamble shop and put off staff. That experience, the poverty he witnessed during those years, and disunity within the ALP spurred his desire to become a full-time politician. Following the ALP split of 1931, he unsuccessfully stood for preselection as the Lang Labor candidate for the federal division of Darling. Three years later, he was successful in gaining preselection for this electorate. Recognising the importance of winning support in the Labor stronghold of Broken Hill, he began and ended his preselection and election campaigns there. Campaigning across this vast rural electorate resulted in his travelling some six thousand miles (9656 km) in total. In public meetings he observed that while he was young in age, he was 'old in the political world' (*Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* 1934, 4), having been involved in politics for the previous eighteen years. His campaign promoted nationalisation of banking and the socialisation of credit, the end of the Premiers' Plan, and unity within the ALP. He was elected at the general election on 15 September 1934. Decades later, when asked how he managed to oust Arthur Blakeley, the sitting ALP member for seventeen years, Clark replied: 'I canvassed the bad friends ... he canvassed the good friends', and it turned out that 'he had more bad friends than good friends' (Clark 1985).

From 1937 to 1966, Clark was re-elected at a further twelve elections. Most of his thirty-five years in office would be spent on the opposition backbenches. In the company of Lang Labor's federal leader, Jack Beasley, he travelled to Melbourne, Adelaide, and Hobart, to talk to members of the ALP federal executive and argue for the reunification of the party—a feat achieved in 1936. During World War II, he was an active committee member in the Curtin government, serving as deputy chair of the Profits and Meat Advisory Committees, and of the Australian Meat Industry Commission. In October 1943 he became a Temporary Chairman of Committees and, in April 1946, he led Australia's delegation to the first session of the Iron and Steel Committee at the International Labour Organisation in Ohio, United States of America. On his return, he was elected Chairman of Committees (1946–49) and, in the absence of the Speaker, Sol Rosevear, would serve as Deputy Speaker for extended periods in 1948 and 1949. The *Daily Telegraph* described Clark as 'a quiet, solid citizen' who had been 'knocking on the door of Cabinet from the time Labor took office in 1941 ... but always just missed a portfolio', yet it added that when it came to 'a showdown in the House', he could be 'determined' (1947, 26). In June 1949, while he was Deputy Speaker, he did not shy away from naming opposition leader (Sir) Robert Menzies for repeatedly interrupting Arthur Calwell, resulting in the suspension of Menzies from the House.

Clark's service as Chairman of Committees coincided with a particularly volatile chamber and a sharp ideological divide between the two major parties, fuelled by the government's intention to nationalise the banks. On 24 February 1949, the opposition's (Sir) Eric Harrison moved a no-confidence motion against Clark on grounds of partiality, misinterpretation of standing orders, and incompetence

in managing parliamentary procedure, adding that 'this is possibly the strongest motion that has ever been moved in this House against any occupant of the chair in any capacity' (H.R. Deb. 24.2.1949, 656). (Sir) John McEwen, supporting Harrison's accusation of partiality, declared that he had seen 'Mr Deputy Speaker wink at Government supporters when he scored a point', eliciting a riposte from the government side that this was 'a figment of the honourable member's imagination' (H.R. Deb. 24.2.1949, 660, 661). Debate was then adjourned for nearly seven months; when it resumed on 8 September, tempers were still so fraught that the ensuing proceedings occupied most of the parliamentary day, before the motion was defeated on party lines.

The remoteness of Clark's electorate and the demands of his parliamentary duties necessitated his residence in Sydney and Canberra, restricting his ability to visit his electorate. On one particularly windy day in the capital in late 1944, however, the dust was so thick that he quipped: 'I need not have gone to my electorate—it's all coming to me!' (*Daily Telegraph* 1944). He was nonetheless well aware that drought and erosion were very real concerns in his constituency and called on his own government to offer drought relief for pastoralists in the form of long-term loans at low interest. Other issues that he raised in parliament included shortcomings in communication, transport, and health services across his electorate. He was also careful to apprise his supporters, especially trade unionists, of his work in championing their interests. In a 1949 letter to constituents, he proclaimed that he had 'not been in the rear, or in the middle, but in the vanguard' (NLA MS 2708) in protecting the rights and conditions of union members; towards the end of his parliamentary career he maintained that it was through his 'personal efforts' (NLA MS 2708) that the people of Broken Hill had secured a modern airport and could look forward to the introduction of television.

On 18 February 1963, at St Therese Church at Dover Heights, Sydney, Clark married Melbourne 'Mollie' Mary Regan (d. 1985), the former wife of his brother-in-law. During the last years of his parliamentary career, he shared with McEwen the title 'Father of the House', before retiring prior to the election of October 1969. He was farewelled by McEwen, who, with the passage of time, felt that '[i]n Opposition and in government the honourable member for Darling has discharged his responsibilities in such a manner as to be a credit to himself' (H.R. Deb. 26.9.1969, 2091). Clark, in his final speech to the House, foreshadowed his plans by warning members that if they came looking for him, they would 'have to get a boat and row out into the harbour to see me' (H.R. Deb. 26.9.1969, 2094). He was appointed CBE in 1970. Survived by the two sons and two daughters from his first marriage, and two stepsons, he died on 9 December 1992 at Bondi, and was buried in Waverley cemetery.

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