

# **Elder, David Russell: Clerk 2014–2019**

Richard E. Reid

David Russell Elder, sixteenth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 10 November 1955 at Mitchelton, Brisbane, second child of Russell Oscar Elder, accountant, and his wife, Daphne May, both Queensland born. The family moved in 1967 to Murwillumbah, New South Wales, where David attended the local state high school, becoming school captain in 1973. His father was a lay preacher at the Methodist church and, while David taught Sunday school for about three years, he did not retain any religious beliefs or affiliations. This background, however, provided him with something of a ‘moral compass’ (Elder 2020).

After completing high school in 1974, Elder enrolled at The Australian National University (ANU) to read history. As a result of his father’s death, he returned to Brisbane, where he graduated with a degree in history from the University of Queensland (BA Hons, 1977). After a short exposure to the frontline challenge of work with the Department of Social Security in Brisbane, he was accepted into the Commonwealth’s Graduate Program with the Department of Defence in Canberra in January 1979.

Elder’s career with the Department of the House of Representatives began in March 1981. The years that followed, until his appointment as Deputy Clerk of the House in 2010, constituted a long apprenticeship in every major area of House business, making his perhaps typical of the career trajectory necessary for eventual appointment to high office in the department. From 1981 to 1993, he worked for a number of House committees, initially as a research officer and then as secretary for both House and Joint House committees: the Standing Committee for Aboriginal Affairs (1981–83); the Joint Committee on the Australian Capital Territory (1984); and various other committees and major inquiries dealing with Aboriginal affairs (1985–90). During his service as secretary of the House Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration (1990–93), its inquiry into deregulation and banking led to a high-profile and colourfully titled report, *A Pocket Full of Change*. He described this inquiry as one of the ‘most intense experiences’ (Elder 2020).

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 24: David Elder.**

Source: Australian Government Photographic Service (Auspic).

of his career. These years of committee work, extensive national travel, and close working relationships with members of parliament, gave him a strong sense of the comprehensive sweep and purpose of parliament, and of the importance of a national perspective. His intellectual curiosity, and perhaps the personal impact of his exposure to Indigenous issues and conditions, was evident in his obtaining a master's in social anthropology from ANU (1988).

The year 1993 marked the start of the second phase of Elder's progress towards the position of Clerk. He was appointed Serjeant-at-Arms, serving in two separate periods, 1993–98 and 2002–10. As Serjeant, he (or a delegate) had to be present in the chamber whenever the House was sitting and had administrative responsibilities as a senior staff member of the department. In the chamber, he both fulfilled a ceremonial role and supported the Speaker's directions for maintaining order. This included responsibility for escorting members ordered by the Speaker to be removed from the chamber. One incident vividly recalled by Elder occurred on 23 October 2003, when United States president George W. Bush addressed a joint meeting of the House and the Senate in the House of Representatives chamber. Two Greens senators, Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle, interjected repeatedly. In turn, the Speaker ordered each to leave the chamber and, when they refused, instructed the Serjeant to direct them to do so. Each ignored Elder's direction and remained in the chamber. Bush continued his address after each interruption, declaring: 'I love free speech'.

This incident occurred during a period when the physical security of members and the parliamentary precincts necessarily had Elder's particularly close attention. The aftermath of the '9/11' terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, in 2001 had led to a re-examination of all aspects of parliamentary security, with a focus on prevention rather than response. Drawing on his experience as Serjeant-at-Arms, Elder participated on a committee with oversight of some highly visible changes to public access, including the screening of all people entering the building (other than members and senators). He considered that the measures managed to balance the need for security with the public need for access to parliamentarians within 'a democratic system of government' (Elder 2020).

Between his two periods as Serjeant-at-Arms, Elder undertook other senior departmental roles, first as Clerk Assistant (Committees) and then as Clerk Assistant (Table). In 2006 he completed a master of public administration degree at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government at ANU. From 2010 to 2013 he was Deputy Clerk, and, on 1 January 2014, was appointed Clerk. The Clerk of the House was no longer simply the senior member of the Clerk's Office and Clerk at the Table but was, in many respects, CEO of a complex organisation, the Department of the House of Representatives. His tenure coincided with a tumultuous period for the House. Governments changed, there were five prime ministers, a minority

government, and a double-dissolution election. Reflecting on the challenges presented by these developments, he wryly recalled that they made 'life interesting for Clerks' (Elder 2020).

Clerks are 'fascinated by parliamentary procedure' (Elder 2020), and necessarily so. In seeking day-to-day political advantage, oppositions quickly turn to the opportunities available through procedural tactics. The period 2012 to 2018 encompassed many dramatic episodes in the parliamentary contest between government and opposition, producing challenges to existing procedures. In October 2016, owing to a short lapse by a minister, an opposition second-reading amendment to a bill was carried. Such amendments are frequently proposed by oppositions to demonstrate some criticism of a bill but, generally, do not delay its progress. None had been carried until then. Elder was not present in the chamber at the time, but believed his subsequent reaction demonstrated the role of the Clerk in such emergencies: a new procedure was swiftly devised and then applied by the Speaker. The bill, for which the questions on the second reading and subsequently the third reading had been put and agreed to on the voices, was able to be reinstated to the second reading for further consideration by the House. As Clerk, Elder was editor of the seventh edition of *House of Representatives Practice* (2018), in which such episodes were recorded and analysed as part of the House's procedural history. He also contributed other non-political comment and analysis on important aspects of these years of parliamentary turmoil in articles for political journals and addresses to scholarly and professional groups, such as the Australasian Study of Parliament Group.

Elder retired on 2 August 2019. The tributes during his final occupation of the Clerk's chair show sincere regard for an employee who had spent thirty-eight years in service to the parliament and forty-one to the Commonwealth: 'a very humble man', 'dignified', showing 'devotion' and 'dedication', but also possessing a 'wicked sense of humour' (H.R. Deb. 1.8.2019, 1843–46). Reference was also made to his twenty-year involvement with extra-parliamentary educational events—including the Model United Nations Assembly for high school students, held in Old Parliament House, and his contribution to advising and assisting younger, evolving parliaments in Asia and the Pacific. On 4 April 1982, in Canberra, he had married Louise Foster. They had two daughters. In retirement, he continued to take on leadership roles, including with the Rotary Club.

## Select bibliography

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 2016, 1747, 1769–71

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 1 August 2019, 1843–46

Elder, David. 'The New Terrorism: The Parliamentary Response—The Example of the Commonwealth Parliament'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 149–55

Elder, David. 'The Role of the Speaker in Minority Government: The Case of the Australian House of Representatives 2010–2013'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2014): 6–18

Elder, David. 'Does a Chamber Need a Majority to be Effective?' Address to Australasian Study of Parliament Group, ACT Branch, Canberra, May 2015. Copy held on file

Elder, David. 'A Perfect Storm: The 2016 Double Dissolution Election'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 31, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2016): 19–33

Elder, David, ed. *House of Representatives Practice: Seventh Edition*. Canberra: Department of the House of Representatives, 2018

Elder, David. Interview by Richard Reid, 12 June 2020

Elder, David. Personal communication

McIlroy, Tom. 'Turnbull Government Accidentally Votes in Support of Labor in Second Embarrassing Parliamentary Blunder'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2016, 8

This text is taken from '*Order, Order!': A Biographical Dictionary of Speakers, Deputy Speakers and Clerks of the Australian House of Representatives*', edited by Stephen Wilks, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/OO.2023.22](https://doi.org/10.22459/OO.2023.22)