

Fowler, James Mackinnon: Chairman of Committees 1913–1914

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James Mackinnon Fowler (1863–1940), Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 20 June 1863 near Lanark, Scotland, son of James Fowler, farmer, and his wife, Mary, née McKinnon. Little is known of his formative experiences, although he is said to have served with the Black Watch (Royal Highland) Regiment. After education locally and in Glasgow, he entered the counting house of a Glasgow firm in 1884, and later worked in drapery warehouses there and at Manchester before migrating to Australia in 1891. He prospected for gold in Victoria and Western Australia, helped found the Victorian Socialist League, and, in 1898, settled in Perth. On 2 December that year, he married Daisy Winifred Bastow at Subiaco; they were to have a daughter and three sons.

A commerce accountant, freelance journalist, and secretary of the Western Australia Federal League (1899–1900), Fowler won the House of Representatives seat of Perth in 1901 as a Labor Party candidate supporting a revenue tariff, marking him as a free-trader within a party that included many protectionists. (Sir) George Reid's Free Traders had not opposed him, probably so as to avoid splitting the free-trade vote and thereby handing the seat to the protectionists. Despite later changes in party affiliation, Fowler won eight successive victories in Perth, averaging nearly 58 per cent of the primary vote, until his last, unsuccessful, campaign.

The energy with which Fowler campaigned in his electorate was also evident in parliament. He was a frequent speaker and interjector, and he served eagerly on parliamentary committees. His special interest was public finance, but no subject seemed beyond him. He was a member of the Select Committee on Decimal Coinage (1901), the Select Committee on Electoral Act Administration (1904), the Standing Committee on Printing (1901–10), the Standing Committee on Standing Orders (1914–19), and the Joint Statutory Committee of Public Accounts (member,

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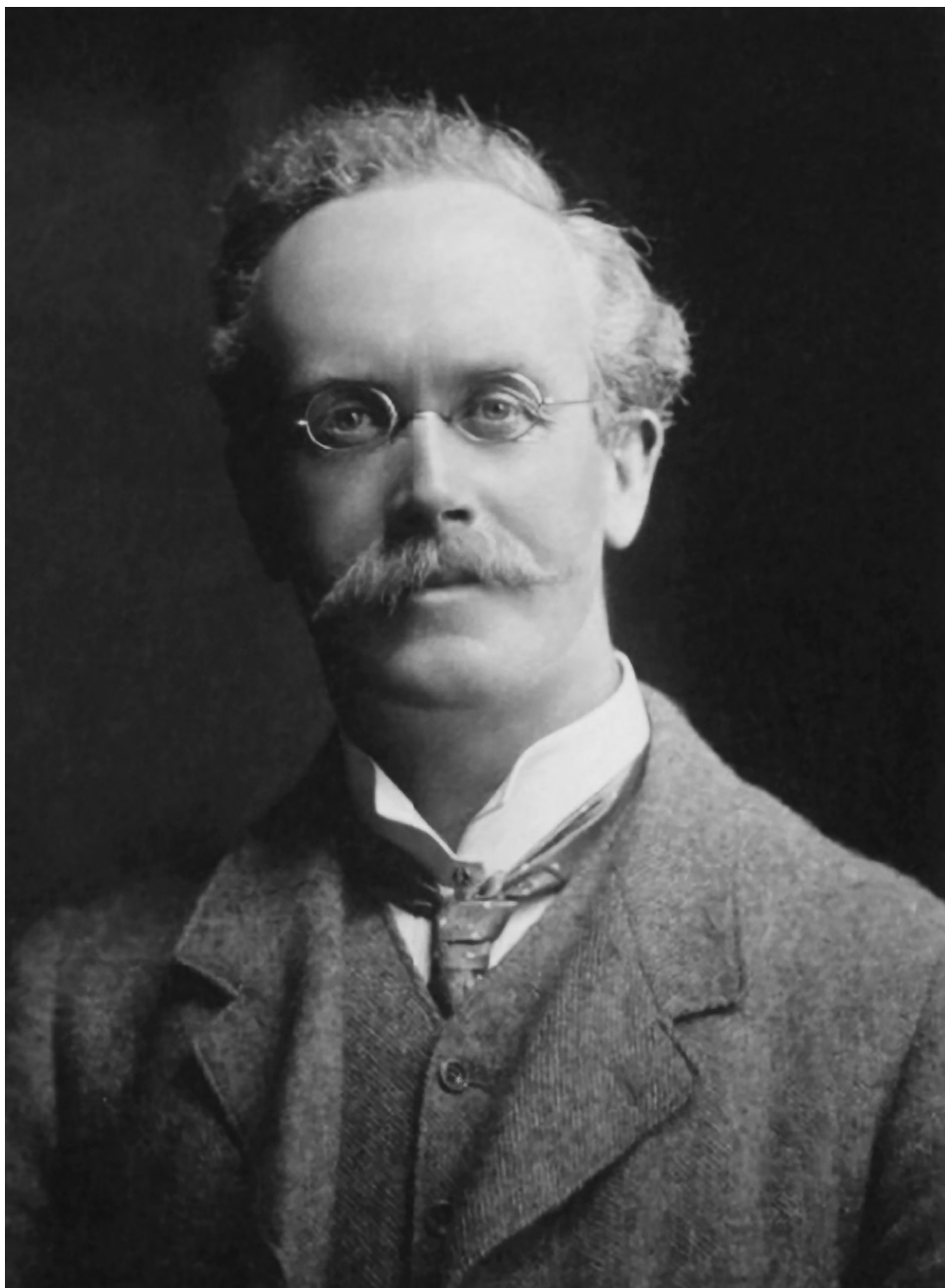


Figure 25: James Fowler.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/6459/34 LOC B21, T. Humphrey & Co. Melbourne.

1914–17; chairman, 1920–22). From 1904 to 1907, he also served on the royal commission on customs and excise tariffs. One of his more unconventional causes was the selection of ministers by parliament rather than by the governing party. In August 1905, he moved a motion to that effect in the House and, during his ensuing speech, revealed much about his frustration with party politics. He condemned the selection of ministers by the governing party as an ‘usurpation of the rights and duties of Parliament’ that was caused by ‘the exigencies of party warfare’, but he failed to sway the House (H.R. Deb 17.8.1905, 1106, 1109).

Fowler’s ambition for higher office probably contributed to his preparedness to serve as one of the Temporary Chairmen of Committees, a position he held in six consecutive parliamentary sessions from 1906 to 1912. In 1909 he deserted his party for the Deakin–Cook Fusion and the Liberal Party that later emerged from it—the result of his distrust of William Morris Hughes and, as a West Australian, a concern that Labor had become too centralist. Among Fowler’s new party colleagues, (Sir) William Elliot Johnson had a stronger claim to be Speaker—first, after the Liberals narrowly won the election of 1913, and then in 1917, in the wake of the Labor Party split that eventually handed government to the Nationalist Party that succeeded the Liberals. Fowler was, however, elected by the House to the position of Chairman of Committees on 9 July 1913, 37 votes to 35 (VP 1913/6, 9.7.1913). His nomination was opposed by Labor, but without any comment being made against him or an alternative candidate being proposed. Labor’s protest was essentially an early signal that the forthcoming parliamentary session would be hard fought, rather than a concerted attempt to secure the Chairmanship for one of its own members.

Both sessions of the brief 1913–14 fifth parliament were fiery, but it was during the first, in particular, that Fowler showed aplomb in weathering dissent to his rulings. During a debate on the Tasmania Grant Bill, he, after some hesitation, defused his own mistaken ruling by taking note of advice from members—including Andrew Fisher, Joseph Cook, Frank Tudor, and Charles McDonald—and then simply announcing: ‘I withdraw the ruling I have given’ (H.R. Deb 11.12.1913, 4174). On eleven occasions during the short second session, he exercised a casting vote, including ten times relating to the controversial Government Preference Prohibition Bill that aimed to outlaw union preference in Commonwealth employment. He and the Speaker, Johnson, who made similar use of his casting vote during this closely contested parliament, endured strong criticism during long late-night sessions. When the government eventually lost office in September 1914, Fowler resumed his accustomed role as an energetic debater and questioner, occasionally voting against his own party.

Fowler was renowned for his deep antipathy to Hughes, both as a fellow Labor member and as his party leader after 1917. He was one of only two members of the new Nationalist Party who in January 1918 voted against Hughes’s continuing leadership

in the wake of his loss of the second conscription referendum and abortive resignation of the prime ministership. In his booklet *Statesman or Mountebank: An Australian Study*, Fowler assailed Hughes's recently acquired reputation as an international statesman by declaring that his behaviour was 'impulsive and headstrong, not over scrupulous', and that on the issue of conscription he had in fact 'thrust Australia into the gutter by his fatuous and cowardly policy' (Fowler 1919, 7, 9). Fowler added that Hughes owed his survival as prime minister immediately following the 1916 Labor split to the resulting Liberal majority in parliament, and he felt that, 'according to all precedent and practice, its leader should have been called upon to form a Ministry at the breakup of the Labour Party' (Fowler 1919, 14). Possibly Fowler imagined that this would have resulted in his finally attaining the ministry he thought he deserved. At the election of December 1919, he easily thwarted John Curtin's second attempt to win a federal seat, but prior to the election of 1922 Hughes was behind Fowler's disendorsement as the Nationalist candidate for Perth. He nonetheless contested the seat as an independent Nationalist; Edward Mann defeated him by little more than two hundred votes in the third distribution of preferences. Fowler was the last Western Australian elected to the House of Representatives in 1901 to pass from the parliamentary scene.

Towards the end of Fowler's parliamentary career, the *Bulletin* suggested a more personal reason for his exclusion from the ministry, judging that he would have 'achieved Ministerial rank long ago if he hadn't been such a good hater' (*Bulletin* 1921, 16). This most earnest of parliamentarians addressed the House with 'a high-pitched voice of great penetrating power and Scotchness' (*Punch* 1912, 6), but was burdened by a bleakly serious demeanour. Following his 1922 defeat, he wrote short stories, newspaper articles, unpublished novels, and a film synopsis (which he optimistically mailed to Cecil B. DeMille); these often drew on his experiences on the goldfields. Sometimes he employed the pseudonyms Hamish Mackinnon and James Evandale. His draft novel, 'The Day of Demos', was inspired by his being 'driven slowly but surely to the conclusion that democracy as a system of government is a rank failure' (NLA MS 2765). He died at his Malvern home in suburban Melbourne on 3 November 1940 and was buried in Springvale cemetery. His wife and four children survived him.

This article supplements the original Volume 8 ADB biography, published 1981, authored by G. N. Hawker, G. C. Bolton and B. K. De Garis. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fowler-james-mackinnon-6224/text10709

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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.2023.23