

# **Green, Frank Clifton: Clerk 1937–1955**

Stephen Wilks

Frank Clifton Green (1890–1974), sixth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 26 June 1890 at Mole Creek, north-central Tasmania, third of five children of Joseph Richard Green, a schoolteacher from Clarence Plains, Tasmania, and his wife, Kate Elizabeth, née Reardon, from Sorell, Tasmania. He described his parents as ‘neither eccentric nor exciting’ (Green 1969, 4). Frank was more appreciative of the lasting influence of his early life in the bush, both at the Western Tiers and at the Huon Valley; as an adult, he sought relief from protracted parliamentary sittings in Canberra by camping out in the Australian Alps. Educated at Cygnet State School and at Queen’s College, Hobart, he embarked in 1908 on studies at the University of Tasmania in arts and then law, with the support of the Tasmanian Operative Lodge Scholarship Trust. He did not complete his university studies, but that same year began a lasting friendship with Joseph Lyons when the future prime minister was, as a student teacher, Green’s football and cricket teammate. He entered the Crown Law Department in 1909. Two years later, following Green’s century-making performance in a club cricket match, the Speaker of the Tasmanian House of Assembly and cricket patron John George Davies appointed him Clerk Assistant.

At St Joseph’s Catholic Church, Hobart, on 29 April 1914, Green married Florence Agnes Kearney, a distant relative who forwent a burgeoning singing career to become his wife. As secretary to the 1915 royal commission on the public debts sinking funds of Tasmania, he came under the stimulating influence of commission member, state parliamentarian, and economist Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin. This was an early instance of Green’s predilection for developing close personal attachments to major public figures. A socialist who readily empathised with Australian Labor Party (ALP) parliamentarians, Green was moved more by sentiment than by doctrine. His literary interests were formed by Rudyard Kipling, Hilaire Belloc, and G. K. Chesterton, and were later supplemented by the poets of World War I.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 27: Frank Green.**

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

On 2 September 1915, Green enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and was posted to the 40th Battalion, a Tasmanian unit, with Giblin as his company commander. Commissioned as a second lieutenant in January 1916, he sailed for England in July and reached the Western Front in November. He saw action in night raids on enemy trenches near Armentieres, at Messines, and at the Third Battle of Ypres. In May 1917, he was promoted captain and, in March–April the next year, participated in counter-attacks near the French town of Morlancourt to turn back the German advance, at one point finding himself in temporary command. In April 1918, he was hospitalised in England and missed his battalion's participation in the final assault on the Hindenburg Line. For his work, especially in the offensive at Messines, he was awarded the Military Cross. His divisional commander and fellow Tasmanian Sir John Gellibrand urged the writing of the battalion's history before it returned to Australia, leading to Green producing in 1922 *The Fortieth: A Record of the 40th Battalion, AIF*. On 7 October 1919, his AIF appointment terminated. War experience profoundly affected his outlook and strengthened his faith in egalitarianism.

Resuming work at the Tasmanian parliament, Green soon fell out with a state minister who, according to Green, sought revenge for denying his brother wartime promotion. After a work trial at Parliament House, Melbourne, in September–October 1920, he transferred to the federal parliament, on 1 April 1921, as Clerk of Papers. Blessed with a talent for friendship, he rapidly became popular with a wide array of politicians, bureaucrats, pressmen, and trade union officials, becoming particularly close to Labor's left-wing assistant leader Frank Anstey. Already shocked by sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants in Melbourne, he was disturbed by the Hughes government using its majority in the House in November 1921 to expel the Irish-born Hugh Mahon for sedition. In 1925 Green was appointed Clerk of Records. Unlike many, he welcomed the federal parliament's move to Canberra in 1927, where he set about exploring the surrounding countryside and pursuing his love for fly-fishing and rabbit-shooting. Using a pseudonym, he wrote light-hearted pieces on Canberra affairs for *Smith's Weekly*, which described its correspondent as 'one of the most civilised personalities in polyglot Canberra, with a healthy appetite for good books, good talk and good humour' (1945, 13).

Following the deaths in quick succession of two Clerks of the House, Walter Gale and John McGregor, Green was promoted Clerk Assistant under Ernest Parkes in November 1927. Influential members of parliament confided in him; Anstey even confessed to an admiration for Stanley (Viscount) Bruce's imperturbable calm. Green appreciated that Speaker Sir Littleton Groom's refusal in September 1929 to cast a deciding vote to save Bruce's government from defeat in the House upheld traditional party neutrality, but also felt that Groom was effectively disfranchising his electorate. He was discomfited by authoritarian rulings by House staff and presiding officers. This included Speaker Norman Makin's decision in April 1931 to ban the Melbourne *Herald's* Joseph Alexander from the House for using leaked cables from Prime Minister

James Scullin. Green felt it was for parliament itself, not presiding officers, to deal with apparent breaches of parliamentary privilege. He considered calm appeals by the Speaker more effective in restoring the dignity of the House than a raised voice and the expulsion of offending members.

After the election of an ALP government in 1929, Green welcomed his old friend Lyons to Canberra but, as the Depression deepened, he watched with dismay as the Scullin government stumbled to defeat in December 1931. Privy to Lyons's growing disillusionment, he later wrote that he understood why Lyons had crossed the floor and felt that his friend had been driven out of the ALP unwillingly. He was reluctant to divulge confidences about the exact circumstances under which Lyons had switched parties to become prime minister. However, he later revealed in his memoirs that Lyons had used him as a discreet intermediary with the architect and businessman Kingsley Henderson, one of the several Melbourne figures involved in seeking this change. During the 1930s, his conviction grew that parliament was in decline. More than ever, he sought solace in the bush. In 1937 he became Clerk of the House. Popularity with the press gallery saved him from public embarrassment when journalists collectively agreed not to report his slip in administering the oath to a new member by requesting allegiance to the recently abdicated Edward VIII.

Green saw Lyons's government crumble and the prime minister's health deteriorate under the weight of events and factional infighting. Some thought him indiscreet in making friends with journalists and with the communist trade union officials Ernest Thornton and James Healy. Gregarious and a great raconteur, Green became a popular figure of Rabelaisian standing. After World War II broke out, he protected the interests of enlisting members of his staff, including Jack Pettifer, a future Clerk of the House, who joined the Royal Australian Air Force. He provided moral support to his friend John Curtin, most famously in 1942 when the prime minister endured sleepless nights worrying about the safety of Australian troops at sea returning from the Middle East. Ben Chifley relieved Curtin from managing the House of Representatives, instituting 9 a.m. meetings with Green on sitting days to set the daily program. Chifley's friendly yet businesslike approach seemed to Green the first ever 'proper organization of the business of the House' (Green 1969, 129).

From 1945 Green watched the Chifley government struggle for stability amid industrial strife, ideological differences, and growing dissension in the ALP. The return of (Sir) Robert Menzies to government in 1949 further dispirited him. He never got on with Menzies, probably because he believed that Menzies had undermined Lyons, readily attributing to him the basest of motives. Green even adjudged a piece of prime-ministerial doggerel about parliamentary officers to be 'deliberately offensive' (TAHO NG792). The final five years of his parliamentary career were dispiriting for him, encompassing the controversy over the proposed dissolution of the Communist Party of Australia, the Petrov affair, and the ALP split. He was rightly convinced that

he had attracted the attention of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization as a result of his public association with Thornton as one of his trout-fishing companions. Within ASIO, he had a discreet informant who passed on information about its operations and occasional interest in him. In March 1953, he suffered his worst blow when his only child, a medical officer with the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority, drowned while fishing near Adaminaby, New South Wales. Three months later, Green dutifully attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in London.

Green's involvement in the notorious 1955 gaoling by the House of Representatives of Frank Browne and Raymond Fitzpatrick was a troubling finale to the long career of this colourful Clerk. Fitzpatrick was a newspaper proprietor from Sydney's Bankstown with suspected criminal connections; Browne was a journalist who wrote for Fitzpatrick's *Bankstown Observer*. On 8 June 1955, the Privileges Committee reported that Browne and Fitzpatrick were guilty of a serious breach of parliamentary privilege. The pair had published articles intended to influence and intimidate the member for Reid, Charles Morgan, by falsely accusing him of corruption. The committee's findings were considered by the House on 9 June 1955 and a motion moved by the prime minister—'That the House agrees with the Committee in its Report'—was agreed to without division (VP 1954–55/267, 9.6.1955). The following day, Fitzpatrick and Browne were, by a vote of the House, gaoled for three months (VP 1954–55/269–71, 10.6.1955).

In his memoir, Green recalled that Lyons, in 1934, had had a bill prepared to belatedly implement a 1908 joint select committee recommendation that such prosecutions be instead heard by a justice of the High Court, but it had lapsed after Menzies became attorney-general. A privileges committee established in 1944 to report on alleged breaches became, in Green's view, too absorbed in the pursuit of political capital to be effective. He advised the committee that parliamentary privilege should not be used to protect a member against alleged actions outside the House and should instead be pursued in the civil courts. According to Green, Browne in particular had attracted the ire of both Menzies and the deputy leader of the opposition, Arthur Calwell, by publishing a snide reference to the prime minister not having volunteered for the AIF. He considered the proceedings that ensued to be 'disgraceful' (Green 1969, 159), not least because his last-minute request to Menzies to allow two barristers to appear at the Bar of the House for the accused was disallowed.

In June 1955, Green retired and returned to Hobart. He was appointed CBE in 1959. Later he became president (1961–64) of the local branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and an active conservationist. His pleasure in 'historical research as a form of escape from contemplation of the present and the future' (TAHO NG792) led to his serving as the founding chairman of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Tasmanian working party and writing entries on fifteen figures from Tasmanian colonial history. He also edited *A Century of Responsible Government*:

1856–1956 (1956), a major source on the state's history, and authored *The Tasmanian Club, 1861–1961* (1961). His memoir, *Servant of the House* (1969), was written in his characteristic discursive and declamatory style. Despite having more often been observer than participant, his narrative ranges confidently across the great political events of his times. Of the nine Speakers under which he served, he had most to say about Archie Cameron, whom he thought 'a queer mixture of generosity, prejudice and irresponsibility' (Green 1969, 137). He advised Menzies that his selection of Cameron for the Speakership was 'the worst possible choice' (Green 1969, 136). His memoir's trove of anecdotes has been extensively mined by historians. The most oft-repeated is Green's account of trying to comfort Curtin as he paced the grounds of the Lodge late at night, succeeding only in persuading the anxious prime minister to join him for tea in the kitchen. Soon after the 1949 election, the defeated Chifley, seeking Green's solace, admitted that the unexpectedly severe loss was probably his own fault for moving too quickly on bank nationalisation.

The ALP parliamentarian Leslie Haylen considered Green 'far and away the best Clerk of the House the Parliament has had', being 'cautious, informed and steeped in the records of Parliament here and in Britain' (Haylen 1969, 157). Private correspondence in his retirement confirms his disdain for most politicians under whom he served, and his fear that parliament was increasingly dominated by the executive. In retirement, he still considered Giblin the best man he had known. He came to see himself as a failure in his dedication to upholding parliamentary democracy yet also as something of a seer, concluding his memoirs with a portentous assessment of the possible outlook for humanity: 'I submit that Man is the parasite of the Earth' (Green 1969, 166). Survived by his wife, he died on 12 September 1974 at New Town, Hobart, and was cremated.

*This article supplements the original Volume 14 ADB biography, published 1996, authored by W. A. Townsley. [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/green-frank-clifton-10351/text18329](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/green-frank-clifton-10351/text18329)*

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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.2023.25](https://doi.org/10.22459/OO.2023.25)