

Groom, Sir Littleton Ernest: Speaker 1926–1929

David Carment

Sir Littleton Ernest Groom (1867–1936), barrister and sixth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 22 April 1867 at Toowoomba, Queensland, third son of William Henry Groom, and his wife, Grace, née Littleton. A brilliant student, winning many prizes, Littleton was educated at Toowoomba North State School, Toowoomba Grammar School, and the University of Melbourne (MA, 1891; LL.M., 1892). While at Ormond College, Melbourne, he participated in journalistic and cultural activities, exposing himself to ideas that would later emerge in his political career.

Between 1891 and 1901, Groom combined a barrister's practice in Brisbane with involvement in church and educational ventures. An active and devout Anglican, he believed that Christians should make practical efforts to help the less fortunate. As well as an involvement with the Brisbane Literary Circle and the Brisbane School of Arts, he was a leading figure in the Queensland University extension movement that organised public lectures. He collaborated in the authorship or preparation of legal reports and texts and, in 1900, was appointed a deputy judge of the District Court. On 4 July 1894 in South Melbourne, he married Jessie, daughter of Charles Bell, a Presbyterian minister of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

William Groom had been elected to the first House of Representatives in March 1901 as the member for Darling Downs but died on 8 August that year. At the request of his father's supporters, Littleton stood at the subsequent by-election; he received the Barton government's endorsement and, despite a strong opponent, was elected with a substantial majority on 14 September 1901. He soon became identified with the more radical protectionists. As an enthusiastic convert to the 'new liberal' ideology, he was convinced that government should 'seek to realise the ideal of justice to every part of the Commonwealth in national legislation' (Groom 1930, 21). A fervent nationalist, he believed the Commonwealth rather than the states should become the focus of popular loyalties. He argued for a drastic extension of Commonwealth powers,

'ORDER, ORDER!'

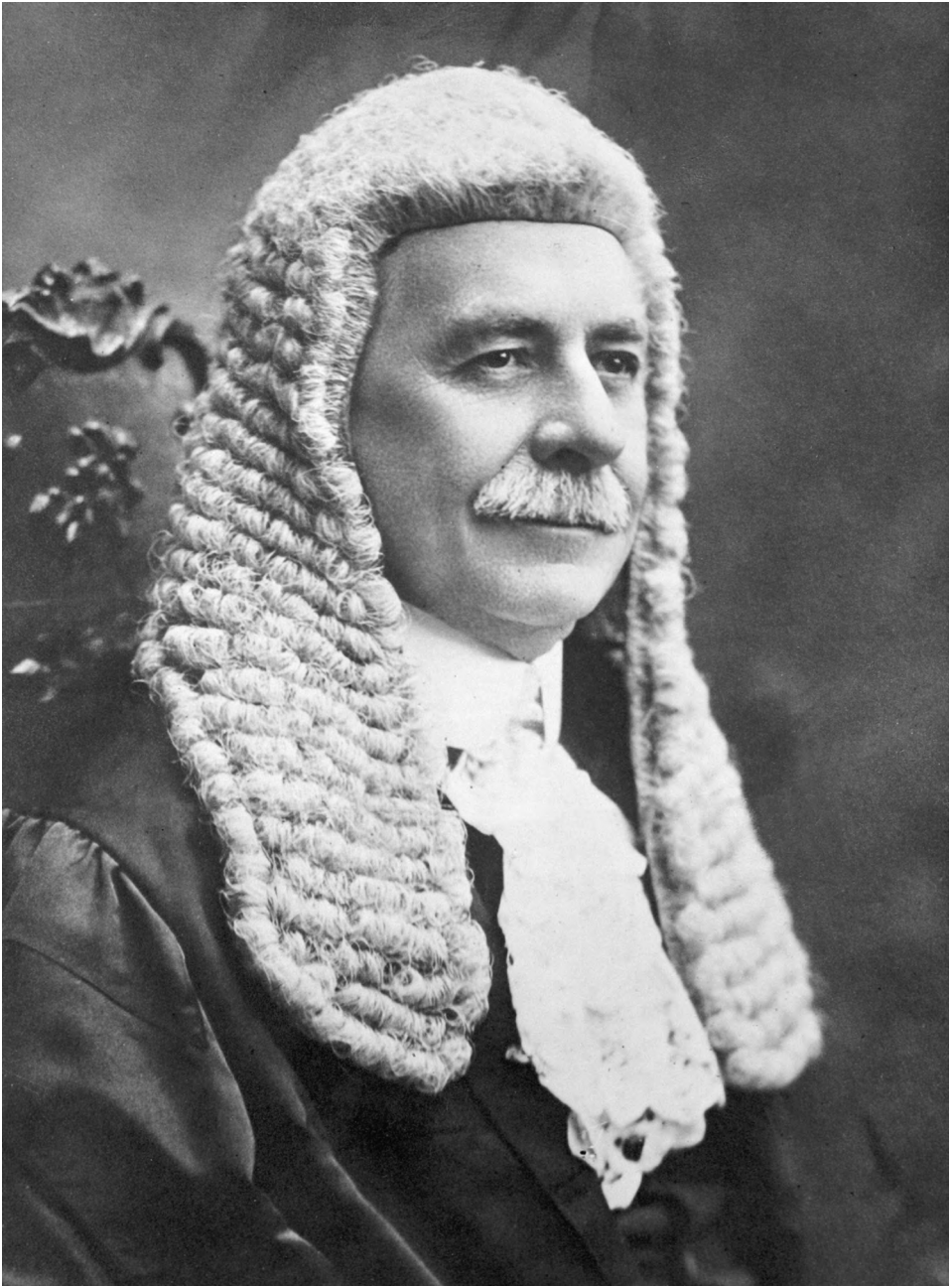


Figure 28: Littleton Groom.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

particularly in regard to industrial relations. Because he favoured Commonwealth conciliation and arbitration, he supported the short-lived Labor administration of 1904 and the alliance between Labor and some protectionists.

On 5 July 1905, Alfred Deakin appointed Groom minister for home affairs in the new Liberal Protectionist administration, revealing him as an energetic and forceful politician. Also important were his links with the Labor caucus, the Deakin government being dependent on Labor support. Groom's championing of the expansion of Commonwealth activity led to clashes with the states, including disputes with New South Wales over the proposed Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics and the site for a federal capital. His greatest success concerned Commonwealth involvement in meteorology and the transfer to the Commonwealth of state properties. Promoted to attorney-general on 12 October 1906, he was, for the next two years, closely involved with most aspects of government policy. He defended new protection, introduced bounties legislation, helped enforce H. B. Higgins's Harvester Judgement on a minimum wage (1907), attempted to control the operations of large trusts, and represented the Commonwealth in the High Court when its Excise Tariff (Agricultural Machinery) Act 1906 was challenged.

Groom's last major achievement during the Deakin administration was legislation to provide Commonwealth invalid and old-age pensions in 1908. In introducing this bill, he proclaimed his 'sense of deep national responsibility to every single unit in the community ... if any single person in the great industrial army meets with disaster in the course of his work, a duty is owing to him' (H.R. Deb. 3.6.1908, 11925). While he had reservations about the Fusion of non-Labor parties the following year, in the end, he saw no realistic alternative given Labor's intention to stand candidates against Liberal Protectionists. He was also concerned that Labor was moving towards a more doctrinaire socialism; for him, the stage had been reached where governments should consolidate previous reforms rather than introduce new ones. One of only three Liberal Protectionists included in the Fusion government of 2 June 1909, he served for the next eleven months as minister for external affairs. Much of his legislation was blocked in the House, and even his High Commissioner Bill of 1909, which was ultimately successful in establishing Australian representation in London, received much criticism.

In the election of 1910, Groom was one of the few former Liberal Protectionists to hold his seat against Labor, which for the first time won control of both houses. Thereafter, he became a prominent opponent of Labor's socialistic measures. He attacked such proposals as the establishment of a Commonwealth bank and attempts to gain Commonwealth control over monopolies, which he now argued were designed only to appeal to trade unionists or unnecessarily interfere with human rights. He was minister for trade and customs in (Sir) Joseph Cook's Liberal

'ORDER, ORDER!'

government of 1913–14. The policy of reversing Labor's achievements, however, frustrated whatever desire he had for positive initiatives. Along with Cook, he often declared that the Liberals could achieve little when Labor controlled the Senate.

After Labor's victory in the double-dissolution election of September 1914, Groom devoted himself to the war effort. He saw no contradiction between his Australian nationalism and what he constantly stressed was the righteous Allied cause, and was active in the pro-conscription campaign before the 1916 plebiscite. From 17 February 1917, he served in the Nationalist government of William Morris Hughes as assistant minister for defence, until 16 November, when he became vice-president of the Executive Council. He was prominent in the conscription plebiscite of 1917.

The war reinvigorated Groom's advocacy of increased Commonwealth powers. In 1919, unlike many Nationalists, he supported Hughes's proposals to strengthen Commonwealth powers in industry, trade, and commerce. He felt that the war had accustomed people to extended national authority and maintained that the Commonwealth government was the only instrumentality able to cope with the perplexing problems of the postwar years. As minister for works and railways from 27 March 1918, he pushed for a vigorous development program. He supervised increased Commonwealth involvement in the Murray waters conservation scheme and construction at Canberra where, according to Walter D. Bingle, secretary of the Department of Works and Railways, Groom was 'the man who lifted the whole business out of the bog' (Carment 1983, 132).

On 21 December 1921, Groom again became attorney-general, retaining the post for four years. He was appointed KC in 1923. Although the most senior minister in the House of Representatives, Sir Littleton was passed over for the Nationalist leadership on Hughes's resignation when the Nationalist–Country Party coalition under Stanley (Viscount) Bruce and (Sir) Earle Page was formed. He was not happy with the coalition, nor did he like Bruce, but their relationship started amicably enough. Bruce respected Groom's experience and was no doubt largely responsible for the latter's elevation to KCMG in January 1924. From 29 May until 13 June 1924, Groom was also minister for trade and customs, and for health.

As attorney-general, Groom's record was mixed. He presided over a new public service superannuation scheme and replaced the public service commissioner with a board of three. However, he encountered problems in attempting to extend the Commonwealth's industrial powers. During 1924 he served as leader of the Australian delegation to the fifth assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva. As a committee chairman, he helped formulate a protocol that aimed to establish a more concrete system of international arbitration. He was later disappointed when most league members, including Britain and Australia, rejected the protocol; instructed to abstain, Groom voted for the measure.

Perhaps of most significance was Groom's role in deportation proceedings against 'foreign' radical agitators who he felt posed a threat to Australia. It was largely on his initiative that two Irish republican spokesmen were deported in 1923, and he participated in the unsuccessful attempt to deport two overseas-born leaders of the Australian Seamen's Union during 1925. Partly because of his handling of the latter case as well as a general dissatisfaction with his performance, Bruce demanded Groom's resignation as attorney-general; this was proffered and took effect on 18 December.

In compensation for his departure from the ministry, Groom was chosen as the government's nominee for Speaker when William Watt stepped down. Labor parliamentarians praised Groom's character but criticised the way in which he became the nominee after losing the attorney-general's position. The fiery Frank Brennan quipped that Groom had not exactly been elevated to the position of Speaker but rather had been "delevated" to that high office' (H.R. Deb. 13.1.1926, 21). He was, nevertheless, elected on 13 January 1926, with no opposing candidates. In cooperation with the President of the Senate, Sir John Newlands, and with the assistance of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Walter Gale, among his earliest tasks was supervision of the Commonwealth parliament's move from Melbourne to Canberra, which took more than a year to be fully implemented. At the very end of the House's final sitting in Melbourne, on 24 March 1927, Groom honoured all those who had sat there since Federation by declaring that he was 'proud to feel that when the history of Australian politics comes to be written, their work will inspire our future citizens to fashion their lives and conduct on similar ideals' (H.R. Deb. 24.3.1927, 1085).

Groom sought to make the Australian Speakership as similar as possible to that of the House of Commons. He often argued that British precedents bound him. During the ceremony of 11 October 1926, when the Empire Parliamentary Association of Great Britain presented a replica of the House of Commons Speaker's chair to be used in the Australian parliament's new home in Canberra, he dwelt on the value of parliamentary traditions, describing the new chair as 'one of the most treasured possessions of the Nation' (*Canberra Times* 1926, 1). This was reinforced for Groom when, on 9 May 1927, he participated in the formal opening of Canberra's first parliamentary session at which the Duke of York (later King George VI) represented King George V. Hughes wrote that, for Groom, the relevant British traditions principally meant 'very rigid ideas about the dignity of the Chair', with the result that he felt 'very strongly that its occupants should be completely removed from party strife' (Groom 1941, 253–54). Resentful at his loss of ministerial rank, in poor health, and grieving his daughter Grace's death in 1926, Groom also possibly attempted to enhance the Speaker's status to compensate for his own disappointments.

There are varying views on Groom's Speakership from two parliamentary colleagues who observed it closely. His immediate successor as Speaker, Norman Makin, argued that, while Groom was 'gentle and likeable', he was 'nervous, and at times uncertain', leading to his having 'held the rein a little too tightly when the House had the more quiet spells in debate' (Makin c. 1962). Hughes, being friendly with Groom, was predictably more complimentary, describing him as 'dignified, courteous and friendly' and 'eminently fair' (Groom 1941, 253). His manner, Hughes thought, 'invited approach and members came to him freely for advice ... the advice he gave would be that by which he himself would have been guided' (Groom 1941, 253).

When, following the November 1928 election, members of the non-Labor parties gathered in Canberra, on 5 February 1929, government ministers wanted James Garfield Bayley, Chairman of Committees in the previous parliament, to replace Groom as Speaker, but opposition from Groom and others left the government with no option other than to support his re-election. The deputy Labor leader, Edward Theodore, later claimed that the government's dissatisfaction with Groom resulted from his refusal to hamper Labor members during debates. During August and September 1929, the Commonwealth government controversially attempted to withdraw from the field of industrial regulation, apart from the maritime and waterfront industries. Its Maritime Industries Bill, introduced into the House of Representatives on 23 August, was widely interpreted as an attack on the arbitration system that Groom had long strongly supported. On 10 September, Hughes moved an amendment in committee that the bill, if passed, not take effect until after it had been submitted to the people either in a referendum or at a general election. Five other non-Labor members indicated they would support him. Because Labor also backed the amendment, the government faced the prospect of defeat by one vote unless Groom voted against it. Bayley, as Chairman of Committees, could only cast a vote if the numbers were equal.

Realising how desperate the situation was, on 11 September, Bruce visited Groom's chambers. Later that day Groom wrote to his wife of how he reminded the prime minister that the Nationalists had always stood by British traditions and that the impartiality of the Speaker was 'most sacred'. Bruce responded, fruitlessly, that the damage to the Speakership 'was small compared to the damage of the Government going out of office'. Groom now felt clear on why ministers had not wanted him as Speaker and concluded that the government 'by its own actions has produced the trouble' (Groom 1929). The Nationalist senator H. S. Foll reminded Groom the next day that he had remained in government office as a member of the Cook government in 1913–14 because of the Speaker's casting vote. Bruce added that Groom's refusal to vote amounted to a wrongful disenfranchisement of the Darling Downs electorate. At the critical division, the motion was carried by a single vote. On the prime minister's advice, the governor-general dissolved the parliament and, at the election of 12 October 1929, the Bruce–Page government was heavily defeated.

Groom's actions were widely criticised. Some of his non-Labor colleagues said that there were clear precedents under which he could have exercised his vote—a view later endorsed by Gavin Souter, an historian of the Commonwealth parliament.

There are three possible explanations for Groom's decision: the Speakership issue, opposition to the government's stance on arbitration, and what Bruce's biographer, David Lee, described as Groom's 'accumulated grievances against Bruce' (2010, 90). The last, although significant, was not as fundamental as the other two. While Groom's commitment to arbitration was strong, his concern about the dignity of the chair was equally genuine. With his legal background and desire to follow relevant British parliamentary practices, he hesitated to defy what he considered the correct House of Commons precedent. His longstanding commitment to Commonwealth involvement in arbitration makes it likely that, had he voted, it would have been for Hughes's amendment.

Denied Nationalist endorsement for Darling Downs, Groom stood as an independent at the 1929 election. The local campaign was particularly bitter, with the Nationalists contending that Groom's primary motive in refusing to save the government was his view on arbitration rather than—as he and Hughes continued to claim—the traditions of his office. His heavy loss to the official Nationalist candidate ended nearly seventy years of continuous parliamentary representation of the Toowoomba district by the Groom family.

Groom returned to the Bar in Brisbane but won back Darling Downs as an independent on 19 December 1931. He joined the United Australia Party in August 1933. For the remainder of his parliamentary life, however, he was not as active as he had been, and instead used his prestige to aid particular causes. President of the Australian branch of the League of Nations Union, he remained a leading lay member of the Church of England, and forcefully argued for a national university. He died in Canberra on 6 November 1936 of coronary vascular disease, survived by his wife and one of their two daughters. A well-attended funeral service was held at Parliament House and he was buried in the grounds of the Anglican Church of St John the Baptist, Reid. Jessie Groom's compilation, *Nation Building in Australia* (1941), was intended as both a memorial and a vindication of Groom's decision not to save the federal government in 1929. Fred Leist's portrait of Groom is in Parliament House and a memorial spire stands in Toowoomba. A reconfigured Darling Downs federal electorate was named after him in 1984.

Throughout his career, Groom followed a set personal routine. In addition to political duties, he led an active social life, spent considerable time working for the Church of England, at one stage being a member of its Australian synod, and wrote dozens of articles and pamphlets on legal, political, and religious subjects. He was joint author with Sir John Quick of *The Judicial Power of the Commonwealth* (1904). At Toowoomba, he resided in a comfortable home overlooking the Great

Dividing Range and was a conscientious local member, whose short and always well-dressed figure was a familiar sight. What leisure time he had was spent in gardening, photography, and reading.

The refusal of Groom to save his own government in 1929 must loom large in any assessment of his Speakership. While he is sometimes viewed as a 'mild and somewhat pedantic' (Souter 1988, 252) politician of only moderate ability, he left a distinct mark on his country. Hardworking, efficient, and honest, he was responsible for numerous reforms and was among the first to realise that many political problems could only be treated in a national context. He also stands out as representative of a significant mode of non-Labor thought, though his concept of the active social role of the state differed from the Labor view only by degree. On occasions, he went so far as to justify the limitation of individual liberties if the interests of the majority were at stake. In his speeches and writings, he portrayed himself as a liberal, in the evident belief that the word had a consistent, if developing, meaning. The striking feature of his life was not only the continuity of his beliefs, but also the frequency with which he acted on them.

This article supplements the original Volume 9 ADB biography, published 1983, authored by David Carment. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/groom-sir-littleton-ernest-6499/text11145

Select bibliography

Argus (Melbourne). 'Sir Littleton Groom'. 26 September 1929, 8

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 3 June 1908, 11922–26

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 13 January 1926, 16–23

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 24 March 1927, 1084–85

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 August 1929, 280–91

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 10 September 1929, 841–46

Canberra Times. 'Empire Parliamentarians' Visit'. 14 October 1926, 1

Canberra Times. 'Political Storm in the Nationalist Party'. 6 February 1929, 1

Carment, David. 'Australian Liberal: A Political Biography of Sir Littleton Groom, 1867–1936'. PhD thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1975

Carment, David. 'A Question of Conscience: Sir Littleton Groom, the Speakership and the Fall of the Bruce–Page Government'. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 23, no. 1 (April 1977): 70–75. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.1977.tb01228.x

- Carment, David. 'Groom, Sir Littleton Ernest (1867–1936)'. In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 9, general editors Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle, 130–33. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1983
- Carment, David. 'Sir Littleton Groom and the Deportation Crisis of 1925: A Study of Non-Labor Response to Trade Union Militancy'. *Labour History*, no. 32 (May 1977): 53–54. [jstor.org/stable/27508258](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27508258)
- Carment, David. 'Sir Littleton Groom: Forgotten Founder'. *Canberra Historical Journal* (NS), no. 1 (March 1978): 1–7
- Daily Standard* (Brisbane). 'Federal Rumbblings'. 8 February 1929, 6
- Daily Telegraph* (Sydney). 'Election of Speaker Almost Brings Crisis'. 6 February 1929, 3
- Fitzhardinge, L. F. Interview by David Carment, 2 August 1973
- Groom, Jessie, comp. *Nation Building in Australia: The Life and Work of Sir Littleton Ernest Groom, KCMG, KC, MA, LL.M., MP.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941
- Groom, Littleton. Letter to Lady Groom, 11 September 1929. Papers of Sir Littleton Groom, MS 236, series 2, folder 65. National Library of Australia
- Groom, Littleton. 'Makers of Federation'. *Brisbane Courier*, 6 December 1930, 21
- Lee, David. *Stanley Melbourne Bruce: Australian Internationalist*. London: Continuum, 2010
- Makin, Norman. 'The Hon Sir Littleton Groom, KCMG', c. 1962. Papers of Norman Makin, MS 4663. National Library of Australia
- Souter, Gavin. *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of the Senate and House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988
- Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Maritime Bill'. 30 August 1929, 11
- Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Critical Position'. 10 September 1929, 15
- Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Speaker's Absence'. 11 September 1929, 15
- Telegraph* (Brisbane). 'Dissolution!' 13 September 1929, 2

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.2023.26