

# Harris, Ian Charles: Clerk 1997–2009

Nicholas Brown

Ian Charles Harris, fourteenth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 16 August 1945 at Kurri Kurri near Cessnock, New South Wales, eldest of three children of locally born parents Charles Rutter Harris, coalminer, and his wife, Beryl Isobel. Ian was descended from several generations of miners; his maternal grandfather was involved in the Rothbury Colliery lockout of 1929. His father encouraged Ian to see that his education should offer an alternative path. Taking the seven-year-old boy into a mine and turning out the lights, he let the darkness make his point.

Dux of Kurri Kurri High School and supported by bursaries and scholarships, Harris studied at the University of Newcastle (BA Hons, 1965; Dip. Ed., 1966; MA, 1969), specialising in Australian constitutional history. While at university, he served on the student representative council, tutored in history, and wrote a weekly column for the *Newcastle Herald* on 'town and gown' affairs, which also informed a regular program on Radio 2NX. After graduation, he taught at Newcastle Technical School and at Canberra High School, where he 'relished the beauty of Canberra with its clean inland climate' (Cotton 2002).

In 1971 Harris was accepted into the Commonwealth Public Service Administrative Training Scheme, and particularly enjoyed his first rotation in the Prime Minister's Department and introduction to the Department of the House of Representatives. His interest in the work of the House was spurred by events surrounding the end of (Sir) John Gorton's prime ministership and Gough Whitlam's mastery of the chamber as leader of the opposition. At the conclusion of his traineeship, he successfully applied to join the parliamentary service in 1972, his tasks including the provision of research assistance to House committees. Appointed to Senior Parliamentary Officer in the Table Office in 1977, he oversaw procedural, administrative, and reporting support for the House. From 1981 as Clerk Assistant (Committees), he further refined his appreciation of the review, investigation, and legislative appraisal roles of the committee system as it assumed more comprehensive and specialised functions, including in facilitating communication with the public. Although respectful of

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**Figure 30: Ian Harris.**

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

the responsibilities carried by the department, he also sought to ease some of the formalities among its staff. Promoted to First Clerk Assistant (1985), he later became (1993) the first Deputy Clerk to be appointed following open advertisement of the position. A member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's Expert Group in Parliamentary Training, he led the establishment of the Australia-based Inter-Parliamentary Study Program for staff in 1994.

In July 1997, Harris succeeded Lyn Barlin as Clerk of the House. Keen to consolidate initiatives under way—such as the work of the Main Committee (now called the Federation Chamber)—he explored further reforms in the department. He encouraged exchange between committee, administrative, and procedural staff, and advocated unsuccessfully for the abolition of the Deputy Clerk position so as to dispel a sense of 'inheritance' from the role of Deputy Clerk to Clerk. With more success, he argued that some important principles of the Public Service Act 1999 should also apply to parliamentary staff, while maintaining their status as members of a separate service. He participated in the formulation of a code of conduct, embedded in the Parliamentary Service Act 1999, replacing a rule-driven approach with values to be observed in work. In areas specific to parliamentary officers, the code emphasised service to the parliament rather than to the government. The Act also reflected his concern to limit the term of appointment of the Clerk of the House. After negotiation with the Public Service Commission and the Clerk of the Senate, to whom the same provisions would apply, the term was limited to ten years.

Harris's attention to the professional development of departmental staff, and to defending their neutrality in dealing with members, was matched by his pursuit of efficiency, accountability, and visibility. He enthusiastically supported the creation of the Parliamentary Studies Centre. Established in 2005, in partnership with the Department of the Senate and the governance and political science programs at The Australian National University's Crawford School of Public Policy, the centre promoted the study of parliamentary systems. Its work included linking researchers with parliamentary institutions in and beyond Australia, student internships, and educational programs enhancing public awareness of parliament's role in policy development. A frequent speaker in PSC forums, he saw the centre's Strengthening Parliamentary Institutions project as a core initiative. Developing a comparative research program examining the 'causes of success and failure in parliamentary capacity-building stemming from attempts to modernise and strengthen legislatures' (Harris 2007, 71), the project matched his sense of the importance of balancing traditions with emerging opportunities for communication and inclusion.

The adaptation of parliamentary procedures to developments in information technology, and to new opportunities to engage with the wider community, was, for Harris, another vital commitment. The parliamentary system, he argued, could seem 'geared basically to an Anglo Saxon literate group' (*The World Today* 2009).

He nurtured new practices that incorporated audiovisual, digital, and interactive forms of communication with the 'person in the street' (Harris 2002, 17). This included initiatives that recognised Australia's social diversity—among them, the acknowledgement of Indigenous cultures in the opening ceremony of the House (Harris 2008).

The innovations Harris instituted were not without critics or reservations. His introduction of notebook computers into the chamber assisted members to receive external advice during debate, but also (as Harris conceded) resulted in the Speaker's rulings being more likely to be challenged on the basis of precedent. Electronic communication also raised concerns that his role as the Clerk was elevated by his capacity to communicate with the Speaker more discreetly and less visibly than in a summons to the chair. Yet these experiments, Harris contended, helped to boost parliament's relevance. His suggestion that PowerPoint presentations be introduced into the chamber to 'improve the impact or absorption of information' was unsuccessful, being seen by some as potentially undermining the role of debate in the House's business (Fullilove 2006). His argument in 2008 for the introduction of electronic petitioning—to address the marked decline in the number of citizens' applications to the House—was also rejected. He nonetheless remained a determined advocate of taking parliament to the people, highlighting issues of access and representativeness.

In advancing these causes, Harris drew on a deep sense of the distinctive adaptations of the Australian parliament. The 2004 fourth edition of the House standing orders—the first comprehensive revision since 1963—ended the primacy accorded in 1901 to the practices of the British House of Commons in resolving uncertainties in procedure. Responding to concerns about a perceived decline in standards during question time, he noted the continuing public and media interest in the performance of ministers and shadow ministers, if not necessarily in accountability. As Harris asked, why would 'so many people waste their time so wantonly' (2006, 7) in following question time if it had no value?

In 2002 Harris's defence of the privileges of the House drew him into an extended debate with the Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans. Harris maintained that Peter Reith, a former minister of defence who had left parliament in 2001, could claim legal immunity if asked to give evidence before the Senate select committee inquiring into the 'children overboard' incident of October 2001, on the basis that he was a member of the House at the time of the relevant events. Neither Evans nor the committee accepted that advice, yet on three occasions Reith refused requests to appear. Divided about whether to formally summons Reith—which was judged likely to lead to a protracted court case—the committee did not pursue the matter. In 2008 disagreement between Harris and Evans again gained publicity when Harris advised that a bill originating in the Senate and aiming to increase the pension rate

was effectively an appropriation bill, and on that basis was unconstitutional. This matter also remained formally unresolved, with it being judged within the power of either chamber to refuse to debate any bill. These were case-by-case disputes, but still reflected his support for the primacy of the House and the careful defence of its privileges.

Harris carried his support for the role of parliament and its modernisation into his contribution to the international Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments. Joining its executive committee in 2000, he served as vice-president (2001–03) and president (2003–06)—the first Australian to hold the latter position. Recognising that the ASGP was a bilingual organisation, Harris studied French to help him ensure impartiality in his chairing of meetings. Work with the association extended to participation in parliamentary development projects and training, often in association with the United Nations Development Programme, in Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific. His emphasis in these roles frequently centred on parliament's contribution to 'peacebuilding from below' (Harris 2008, 4), in fostering a dialogue with civil society and in securing the institutions that could advance reconciliation. In 2009 he was appointed the first chair of the steering committee for the Forum of Secretaries-General of Asia Pacific Parliaments.

Harris retired in December 2009 in accordance with the ten-year limit to the Clerk's appointment. Valedictory speechmakers admired his commitment to parliament's reputation and expressed gratitude, as Speaker Harry Jenkins noted, for 'the outward focus' of the department and his own 'strategic engagement with the community in order to promote the parliamentary institution' (H.R. Deb. 26.11.2009, 13107). Several members paid tribute to the support provided by Harris's wife, Erika, the youngest daughter of Istvan and Ilona Hangodi, refugees from Hungary. At the time of their marriage at Queanbeyan, New South Wales, in 1986, Erika was working in a ministerial office. Harris considered that his career, including the relationships fundamental to the collegiality he promoted, had benefited from her energy, advice, and wisdom.

In thanking Harris for his patience and generosity, and also acknowledging Erika's support, the Deputy Speaker, Anna Burke, observed that 'Ian's great day was actually yesterday' (H.R. Deb. 26.11.2009, 13102), when he was inducted into the Hall of Fame at Cessnock. That honour was added to the award of the University of Newcastle Convocation Medal for Professional Excellence (2000), the Australian Centenary Medal (2001), and being appointed AO (2007). Another former Speaker, David Hawker, recalled Harris as 'a man of complete integrity, always impartial and always discreet' (H.R. Deb. 26.11.2009, 13091).

During retirement, Harris's views on parliament continued to be sought, such as during a 2010 dispute over a proposed pairing arrangement for the Speaker and on issues relating to possible abuses of parliamentary entitlements. He was keen,

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however, to seek other directions. Alongside his working life, Harris had been active in community affairs, as secretary of the Tuggeranong Rugby Club (1978), president of the Australian Capital Territory Public Service Rugby League (1993–95), and as a volunteer at the St Benedict's Community Centre for homeless men in Queanbeyan. From 2009, he worked as a landscape gardener, becoming immersed in organic gardening principles, continuing his studies of horticulture, reviving a personal passion for beekeeping, and discovering a talent for recycling and repurposing do-it-yourself projects, as well as enjoying with Erika the company of their four daughters and their own families.

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