

Holder, Sir Frederick William: Speaker 1901–1909

Haydon Manning

Sir Frederick William Holder (1850–1909), first Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 12 May 1850 at Happy Valley, near Adelaide, eldest son of James Morecott Holder, a freeman of the City of London who had migrated to South Australia shortly after his marriage on 9 September 1848 to Martha Breakspear Roby, daughter of a London tailor. James became a schoolteacher at Happy Valley and, about 1870, stationmaster at Freeling. Frederick was educated initially by his father, later at state schools, and then at the Collegiate School of St Peter, Adelaide. He also became a teacher—first at Prince Alfred College, then at Freeling. In August 1875, he was made headmaster of the Burra Public School.

In 1877 Holder, whose school had been superseded by a new Model School, became manager of a Burra store, town clerk, and the first managing editor of the newly established *Burra Record*, of which he was later proprietor. He had already been active in the Burra Parliamentary Club and in the *Record* developed ideas on government at both the colonial and the local levels. Following his election to the Burra Corporation, he served as mayor, in 1886–87 and 1888–89, and was largely responsible for a waterworks scheme and bridge construction. He served as a captain in the South Australian Volunteer Force and on the council of the South Australian School of Mines and Industries.

On 29 March 1877, at Burra, Holder married Julia Maria Stephens, daughter of John Riccardo Stephens, a Cornishman, homeopathic doctor, farmer, teacher, and shopkeeper who had studied for the Methodist ministry. Holder shared his wife's Wesleyan and suffragist convictions and, as a lay preacher, regularly conducted services in Adelaide and in country churches. He was also active in the administration of the church and in seeking unity of the different Methodist denominations. Although he supported his wife's campaigns for temperance and against gambling, he had a keen sense of fun and made a happy home life for their four sons and four daughters.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

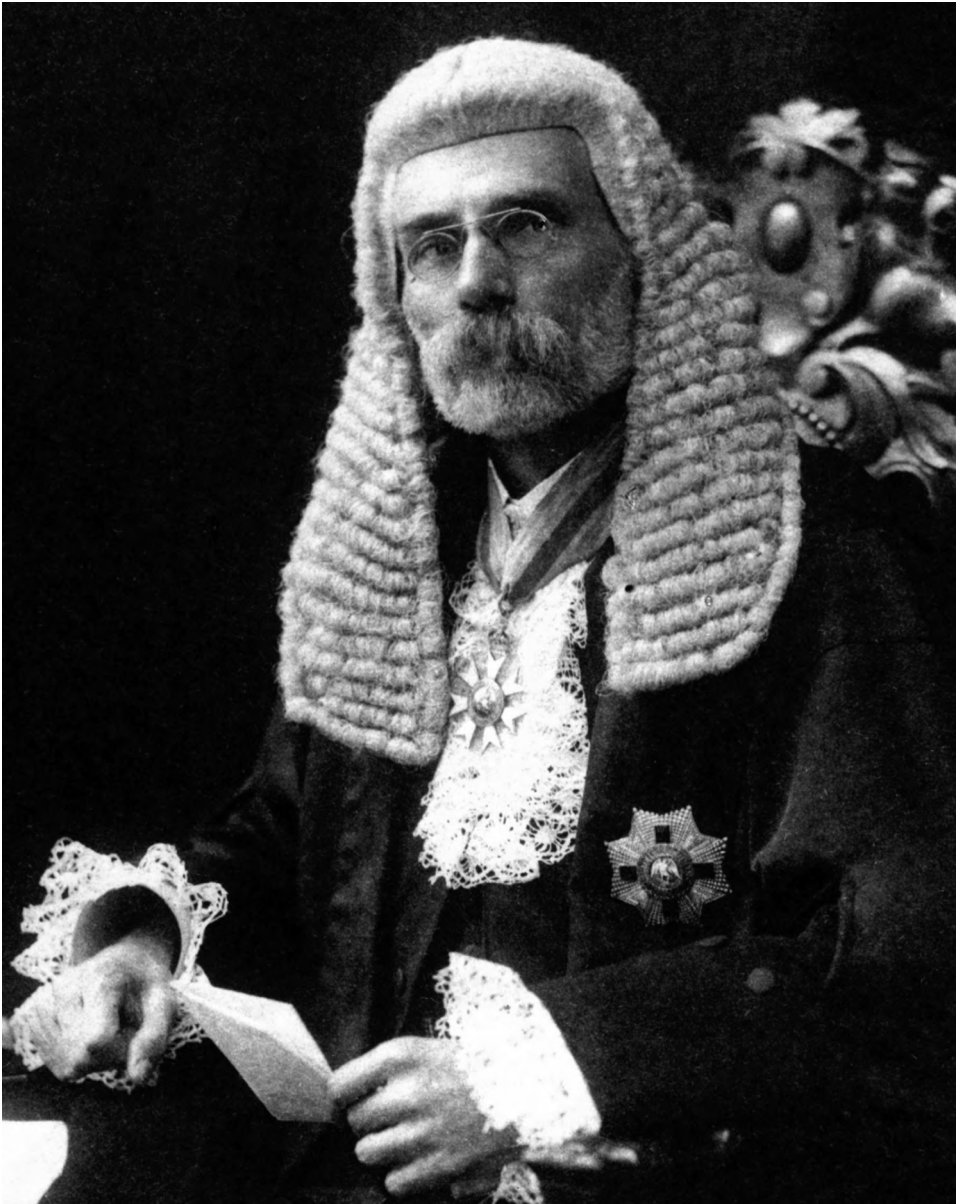


Figure 32: Frederick Holder.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

In 1887 Holder was elected senior member for the multi-member seat of Burra in the South Australian House of Assembly. He retained his seat at four subsequent elections. Describing himself as a free-trader, he opposed the sale of Crown lands in order to remove the deficit and was against a property tax. He favoured an increase of the land tax, reduction of income tax and customs duties, payment of members, and the Chaffey irrigation scheme to harness the Murray River in the Renmark area, but opposed the totalisator. In his first arduous parliamentary session, Holder was a member of the commission on the land laws, the select committee on the *Star of Greece* shipwreck disaster, and chairman of the Barrier Trade Select Committee. On 27 June 1889, he became treasurer in (Sir) John Cockburn's ministry, which introduced succession duties and a progressive tax on unimproved land values. The next year, he was chairman of a select committee—later converted into a royal commission—which advocated the adoption of intercolonial free trade on the basis of a uniform tariff. He was also a member of the commission on landing and embarking European mails.

After the fall of the Cockburn ministry in August 1890, Holder, as leader of the opposition and a member of the pastoral lands commission, in 1891, travelled extensively in the colony. He wrote a series of articles on the pastoral industry for the *South Australian Register*, urging caution in the subdivision of pastoral properties, steady improvement of water resources, and more rabbit-proof fencing. On 17 June 1892, he defeated Premier Thomas Playford in the House on a motion of confidence and became premier and treasurer. It was, however, a time of great financial difficulty and the ministry fell on 15 October.

Following the conservative win in the election of 1893, Holder, though he had been leader of the opposition, made way for Charles Kingston to become premier in recognition of his role in bringing together liberal factions and Labor members to defeat the conservative ministry of John Downer. Holder became commissioner of public works and, from April 1894, treasurer and minister in charge of the Northern Territory, which had been annexed by South Australia in 1863. Kingston had opposed universal adult suffrage at the election but was persuaded by Holder and Cockburn to change his views, with the result that, in December 1894, South Australia became the first Australian colony in which women could vote. The State Bank of South Australia was established during Holder's treasurership and he produced a balanced budget, despite successive years of drought and depression.

Holder was elected a delegate to the 1897 Australasian Federal Convention, second only to Kingston. By the close of the convention, Holder was in the first rank of influence, particularly on financial matters. His belief in the free exchange of goods as a first step towards a united Australia drove his commitment to the federal movement. At the convention, he proposed a clause in the Constitution guaranteeing the national

right for women to vote. Following its defeat, he successfully secured a compromise that would ensure the vote in federal elections for all adults with the vote in their respective state.

On 6 July 1897, Holder presented to the South Australian parliament the draft for a federal Constitution prepared by the convention sitting in Adelaide. When the bill, after revision in Sydney and Melbourne, was submitted to the electors, its acceptance by an overwhelming majority vote in South Australia was largely due to his influence and advocacy. In 1899, when mules pulling his vehicle on a country trip bolted and he seriously injured his hip, he refused to seek medical advice—an early instance of habitual disregard for his own health. On 28 November that year, the Kingston government was defeated and, when V. L. Solomon was unable to form a ministry, Holder again became premier and treasurer, and also minister of industry. He retained these positions until he moved to the federal parliament in May 1901. His second government established libraries in country towns, introduced standard time throughout South Australia, and ensured completion of the Bundaleer and Barossa water schemes.

With other premiers, Holder refused in December 1900 to serve in a federal ministry under the New South Wales premier, Sir William Lyne, as part of an interim government ahead of the general election scheduled for March 1901. To thwart Governor-General Lord Hopetoun's proposal to appoint Lyne, (Sir) Edmund Barton proposed a 'Cabinet of Kings', and Hopetoun, under considerable pressure, changed tack and supported Barton's claim to the prime ministership. Holder coveted appointment as the Commonwealth's first treasurer. As the incumbent South Australian premier, he travelled to Sydney to meet Barton, only to learn that he had been excluded from the ministry in favour of Kingston. Holder's fellow South Australian parliamentarian Patrick McMahon Glynn reported that, despite 'his somewhat neutral nature', Holder was 'furious and disappointed' (Glynn, 4 January 1901), but the journalist Herbert Campbell-Jones instead recalled that he took the news of the 'Kingston-Barton sleight-of-hand' with 'amazing aplomb' (Campbell-Jones 1935). While a public explanation was never issued, Barton was wary of Holder's free-trade position and probably simply preferred Kingston as a fellow protectionist. Moreover, Kingston's position as a long-serving and recent South Australian premier made it relatively easy for Barton to make the case for his suitability.

At the ensuing federal election, conducted in South Australia as a single state-wide constituency, Holder ran as a free-trade candidate. Among the seven members elected, he polled fourth to Kingston, (Sir) Langdon Bonython, and Glynn, with free trade polling 50 per cent of the vote, protection 33, and Labor 16. Holder received the largest number of votes in the twenty-one country districts. In the days before the first session of federal parliament, Prime Minister Barton disregarded pleas to be appointed Speaker that the renowned Federationist Sir John Quick directed via

Alfred Deakin, instead circulating a letter to members canvassing support for Holder as Speaker. Offering the post to Holder shrewdly provided insurance against his being tempted to join (Sir) George Reid's Free Traders. When the parliament sat for the first time on 9 May 1901, Holder was duly elected unopposed, although there were dissenting voices. Bruce Smith, a free-trader from Queensland, denounced Barton's letter as antithetical to House of Commons practice and 'wholly unbecoming to the new order' (H.R. Deb 9.5.1901, 21). His disgruntlement arguably derived from having coveted the Speakership himself, with the *Age* describing this 'first discordant note' as 'a Little Scene' (1901). Donald Cameron of Tasmania more benignly regretted that Holder's elevation would effectively deny the free-traders an extra vote on the floor (H.R. Deb 9.5.1901, 22).

After being ceremonially conducted to the Speaker's chair by his proposer and seconder, Holder assured the chamber of his 'deep sense of the obligation ... which the House has unanimously conferred upon me' (H.R. Deb 9.5.1901, 22). Barton responded by praising him for his 'known acquaintance with Parliamentary usage and practice' and for being 'an honourable and upright man' (H.R. Deb 9.5.1901, 22). Holder faced a daunting task. With only provisional standing orders at hand, based on those used by the colonial assemblies, he 'had only generally accepted principles and his own common sense to guide him' (Souter 1988, 43). Maintaining order was further complicated by the presence in the House of eight other former colonial premiers, the tendency of many members to remain wedded to the standing orders used in their states, and a chamber uneasily divided between three political parties. Despite the *Bulletin's* later comment that Holder should have 'decided to dispense with the horsehair and the millinery' (1909, 7), he more likely benefited from the trappings of authority and traditions of the Speakership. His interpretation of standing orders was from the outset characterised by impartiality and decisiveness. He soon established himself as a commanding presence in the House, with the *Argus* reflecting that 'it is pleasant to hear his sonorous tones giving out a prompt ruling' ('Ithuriel' 1901).

Working with Sir Richard Chaffey Baker, the first President of the Senate, Holder was responsible for adapting Westminster practices and those of the state legislatures to the needs of the new parliament. One early task was to attempt to draft permanent standing orders, Holder having been appointed chair of the Standing Orders Committee on 5 June 1901. The House's failure to agree on new standing orders led to his making do with amendments to the provisional orders. In November 1901, he and the Chairman of Committees, J. M. Chanter, supported the then controversial right of all members to propose revenue-raising laws including tariffs, albeit with misgivings on Holder's part. As chairman of the Joint Library Committee, he was responsible for what would become the blueprint for the eventual National Library of Australia.

Holder was appointed KCMG in 1902. Sir Frederick was returned unopposed at the 1903 election as an independent for the single-member seat of Wakefield, and held the same seat at the 1906 election. Both of his re-elections by the House as Speaker were supported by all three party leaders without contest. He accordingly came to occupy the role very much in the spirit of Westminster, drawing on his relatively independent status to help assert his authority. His success in usually remaining aloof from party politics was demonstrated by his only participating in debates that concerned his administrative role as Speaker. Despite this, he once alluded to 'an almost overwhelming desire to step out of the Chair and tear off the gag' (*Adelaide Observer* 1904).

Superficially, Holder had appeared unsuited to adjudicating over a rancorous chamber that often sat into the early morning hours. Deakin described Holder, who was effectively blind in one eye, as also being 'as thin as a paling', with 'a chest which seemed destined for consumption' (1963, 61). Holder's indifference to his health and the advice of doctors and friends came to the fore in his final days and led to dispute over what caused his fatal collapse. The long campaign for Federation, the establishment of the new parliament, and the vigorous interplay of the parties all took their toll. In the week before his death, he appears to have suffered a minor heart attack caused by exhaustion after rushing to catch the Friday evening train to Adelaide. He did not seek medical advice over the weekend and managed to summon sufficient energy to preach at the West Adelaide Methodist Church—renamed the Holder Memorial Church in 1915—on Sunday evening.

Returning to Melbourne, he was in the House on the night of 22–23 July 1909 while it sat as a committee of the whole debating old-age and invalid pension legislation. The temper of some members was angry following the fusion of protectionists and free-traders six weeks earlier, which formed the Fusionist Deakin–Cook ministry and ushered Deakin back into the prime ministership at the expense of Labor's Andrew Fisher. Holder took the chair briefly shortly after 4 a.m., but made way for Chairman of Committees Charles McDonald when it moved back into committee. He shifted to a seat on the front bench, still dressed in the Speaker's wig and gown, as the treasurer, Sir John Forrest, jousting with the still deeply embittered Lyne. No doubt weary and ailed by his recent health scare, shortly after 5 a.m. Holder uttered 'Dreadful, dreadful!' and collapsed on the floor. Without regaining consciousness, he died that afternoon of a cerebral haemorrhage, still in the parliament building. One of the medically qualified members who tended to him in his final hours was his eventual successor as Speaker, Carty Salmon.

Reflecting on the circumstances of Holder's death, the *Sydney Morning Herald* opined that an 'evil temper' had crept into parliament and 'borne bitter fruit but we hardly imagine that there will be any sudden conversion to better ways' (27 July 1909). In the same vein, the *Age* maintained that 'Sir Fredrick had succumbed to the rising tide of evil in the House' (1909). The *Bulletin* even more provocatively asked, 'What mania possessed the Fused crowd to rave as it did, the Lord only knows, but

... if that insane bellowing killed him, then his dead body lies at the Fused party's door' (1909, 8). Against these press pronouncements, the member for Melbourne, Dr William Maloney, rose in the House to point out that the chief cause of Holder's death was his pre-existing ill health (H.R. Deb 27.7.1909, 1631–32).

Town hall bells across Adelaide tolled when the news was received. The *Advertiser* mourned the loss of 'one of the pillars of Australian Liberalism' (1909). During the condolence motion, Deakin observed that Holder's rulings 'without seeming unduly weighted, were based upon close study and examination of precedent; their delivery was swift, incisive, and clear, thus assisting most materially in the transaction of public business' (H.R. Deb 27.7.1909, 1630). Fisher, as leader of the opposition, spoke of Holder's 'knowledge of procedure ... his kindliness of character, and consideration for everyone' (H.R. Deb 27.7.1909, 1630). After a memorial service in the House, his body was taken by train to Adelaide for a state funeral and burial in West Terrace cemetery. He was survived by his wife and their eight children. Julia Holder in 1916 became Australian president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which she represented at the union's world conference in London in 1920.

Holder's political career was more that of a parliamentarian than an ideologue. In parliament, he marshalled his arguments well and spoke fluently and with fervour. He demonstrated a fine knowledge of Westminster procedure, a mind for detail that served him well as he followed debate, and, given his devoutness, a perpetually sober presence of mind. Despite the manoeuvrings associated with his becoming Speaker, he managed to emulate South Australian practice to remain independent across the six governments that rose and fell during the first eight years of the Commonwealth. Although this relative weakness of the executive helped him to emulate many aspects of the British Speakership, an enduring tradition of independence was never likely, given that this 'had not been firmly established in the colonial legislatures' (Redenbach 1999, 56). Effectively, every ruling of his set a precedent. A future Speaker, Norman Makin, judged that, in producing 'a heavy list of these precedents', Holder was always 'a model of propriety and sagacity' (Makin c. 1962). The veteran journalist (Sir) William Sowden described Holder as one of the 'smartest men in the administration of government business' he had known (*Mail* 1915).

Several of Holder's articles were reprinted in 1892 under the title *Our Pastoral Industry*, and a small book of his sermons, *Condensed Sermons by a Layman*, was published in Adelaide in 1922. There are portraits by George A. J. Webb in the South Australian House of Assembly and in Parliament House, Canberra. Another portrait, by Holder's daughter Rhoda, is held by the National Library of Australia, and a bust by Michael Smerd is held by the Regional Council of Goyder in Burra. His name is commemorated by a Canberra suburb.

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