

# Jenkins, Sir George Henry: Clerk 1901

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Sir George Henry Jenkins (1843–1911), acting and first Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 21 September 1843 at Bedminster, Bristol, seventh of eight children of Henry Jenkins, a schoolteacher born at Abergavenny in the south-east of Wales, and his wife, Mary, née Osland. In January 1853, George and his family arrived on the *Try* in Melbourne, where his father became a draper. He was educated at Rev. T. P. Fenner's Collegiate School, South Yarra, and at Melbourne Grammar School (1859–61). During his schooling, he suffered a health breakdown and spent a year on a station in Victoria's Goulburn Valley to recover (*Argus* 1901, 5).

Jenkins entered government service in 1861 as a clerk in the Victorian Railways Department. In December 1865, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Sir Francis Murphy, appointed him as his private secretary and Clerk of Private Bills. He became Clerk of Committees in 1870 and then Clerk Assistant in 1878. That year he narrowly avoided Premier (Sir) Graham Berry's dismissal of government employees following the Legislative Council's refusal to pass an appropriation bill, and went on to become Clerk of the Legislative Assembly in 1882.

On 18 April 1887, Jenkins married Caroline Kent at All Saints Anglican Church, St Kilda. They had two daughters and a son. With the emergence of the Federation movement, he became Clerk of the Federal Council of Australasia, an ineffectual early attempt to unite the Australian colonies. He was secretary of the Melbourne convention of the Australasian Federation Conference in 1890, at which he displayed 'a proper sense of an occasion, and of his own part in it' (La Nauze 1972, 33). Although Jenkins probably hoped to also manage the 1891 Constitutional Convention in Sydney, the premier of New South Wales, Sir Henry Parkes, preferred the Clerk of his own Legislative Assembly, Frederick William Webb. Jenkins was nonetheless appointed CMG in 1891 for his services to the conference. In May that year, he became Clerk of the Legislative Council, which was widely seen as a promotion and gained for him the associated honorary title of Clerk of the Parliaments.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 33: George Jenkins.**

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/8217 #PIC/8217, J. W. Lindt Melbourne.

The social pages of the Melbourne press regularly mentioned Jenkins alongside prominent local figures, including when they received such renowned visitors as the actor Sarah Bernhardt and Field Marshal Lord Kitchener. He associated with politicians outside parliament, including by joining (Sir) Thomas Bent's welcoming committee for the former Speaker (Sir) Matthew Davies on his return to Melbourne in September 1892 to face fraud charges (Glass 1993, 108–9). Jenkins's studied courtesy was widely admired: Melbourne *Punch*—not overly given to praising public figures—complimented him on his knowledge, discretion, administrative skills, and firmness, which made him 'probably the best Parliamentarian in the Commonwealth' (*Punch* 1901, 4). In 1896–97, he served as president of Melbourne Grammar's Old Melbournians society.

Despite this, Jenkins seemed to have presented a very different face to lesser contemporaries, leading to less flattering assessments. A historian of the parliament of Victoria concluded that Jenkins was 'in fact a lazy, dictatorial, unctuous opportunist' (Wright 1992, 60). Reportedly, he was not above interjecting in debates and delaying the ringing of parliamentary bells until he had finished his drink. Some merchants were said to have refused his custom. Edward Theodor Hubert, who served in the Victorian parliament under Jenkins for fourteen years, maintained a detailed diary from 1891 to 1899 dedicated in large part to denouncing Jenkins, emphasised throughout by the liberal use of exclamation marks. Hubert found his superior 'always very assiduous in working his own way with president's [of the Legislative Council] friends, theatre people & c.' (Hubert 17 January 1898) and, in his more official duties, he was 'the greatest procrastinator I ever met with!!' (Hubert 6 December 1899). A typical anecdote is that 'on one occasion when J. [Jenkins] was clerk of a committee he forgot to send for a shorthand writer so the committee were kept waiting until he arrived, when the committee censured him, but J. sat dumb!!' (Hubert 24 September 1898). Jenkins is also alleged to have demanded that parliamentary staff undertake such personal duties as helping arrange the wedding of one of his daughters and 'searching the *West Australian* to show J. every paragraph having reference to his son's election!!' (Hubert 16 May 1898). (Arthur Jenkins was a member of the Legislative Council of Western Australia in 1898–1904 and 1908–17.)

Whatever Hubert thought, Jenkins's long parliamentary service, connections, and home base in Melbourne led to his appointment on 1 May 1901 as first Clerk of the House of Representatives. This was on an acting basis for the first session of the new federal parliament only, with his return to the parliament of Victoria being ensured by the Commonwealth not paying him a salary. The *Australasian* greeted his appointment as having long 'appealed to him most strongly as being the crowning honour of a long parliamentary career' (13 April 1901, 27).

Shortly before formally commencing as Clerk of the House, Jenkins, in April 1901, received the former mace of the Victorian parliament for use in the House of Representatives. His main contribution to the new Commonwealth was to manage arrangements for the Duke of York, the future King George V, to formally open parliament in Melbourne's Exhibition Building on 9 May. Jenkins's impressive bewhiskered countenance led to a report that some foreign attendees 'thought he was the Governor' (*Leader* 1901, 33). Acclaim for this ceremony was marred by subsequent criticism of its cost. Dispute centred on whether the Commonwealth or the Exhibition Building trustees should pay for the excessive provisioning of furniture and drink, with Bent alleging that 'Mr Jenkins was trying to back out of his responsibility, and place the trouble on the shoulders of the genial Dr L. L. Smith, who was chairman of the Exhibition trustees' (Vic. LA 1901, 173).

*Punch* described him amid his short-lived clerkship as 'probably the happiest, proudest, most important and most worried individual throughout the length and breadth of Australia' (1901, 4). Jenkins seems to have struggled in the unfamiliar context of the Commonwealth parliament. The first ever supply bill went to the Senate without an accompanying descriptive schedule, resulting in senators refusing to consider it. He resigned as acting Clerk on 2 July 1901, effective four days later, eliciting a perfunctory motion of thanks moved by Prime Minister (Sir) Edmund Barton (H.R. Deb. 3.7.1901, 1955–56). Jenkins was the first person to receive a vote of thanks from the House of Representatives.

Three years after returning to the state parliament, Jenkins was knighted. Sir George retired on 20 September 1910, marking forty-five years of continuous parliamentary service. Hoping to recover from bronchitis, he joined his eldest daughter, who lived in Hatton, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), as wife of a tea planter. He died in Colombo on 18 July 1911. The *Australasian* recalled how in the chamber he had presented 'a picture of earthly felicity' (22 July 1911, 44). But there were also hints that Hubert's portrayal of Jenkins as a two-faced opportunist had some basis. The *Bulletin* classed him as 'the most humourless of persons', who celebrated receiving 'his precious title' by making 'the rounds to receive the congratulations of the barmaids'. But even it grudgingly conceded that 'he had ability of a kind' (1911, 9). A diary that he was reportedly intending to publish (*Argus* 1901, 5) never appeared.

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