

Jenkins, Henry Alfred (Harry): Speaker 1983–1985

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Henry (Harry) Alfred Jenkins (1925–2004), medical practitioner, state parliamentarian, and eighteenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 24 September 1925 at Caulfield, Melbourne, only surviving child of Tasmania-born Henry Alfred Jenkins, storeman-packer and metal polisher, and his Victorian-born wife, Eileen Clare, née McCormack. Educated at Victorian state schools and Ivanhoe Grammar School, Harry went on to study at the University of Melbourne (MSc, 1948; MB BS, 1952). Though he enjoyed the support of his parents throughout his tertiary studies, he helped to meet his educational fees by undertaking ‘odd jobs’ (Jenkins 2020), such as caddying at golf courses. During his postgraduate studies, he worked as a part-time tutor and demonstrator in the university’s physiology department.

Upon graduating, Jenkins was a resident medical officer at the Alfred Hospital (1953), before becoming a general practitioner at Thornbury and Thomastown in Melbourne’s north. While a resident medical officer, he met Hazel (Wendy) Winter, a trainee nurse from Ascot Vale, with whom he began a ‘courtship at the Alfred’ (Jenkins 2020). On 6 September 1951, they married at St Luke’s Anglican Church, South Melbourne. They had a daughter and three sons, one of whom, also Henry (Harry) Alfred, would follow his father to the Speakership.

Jenkins’s holistic approach to medicine equipped him well for his later political career. His view was that medicine was ‘just not a matter of treating disease’, but rather of ‘getting to know the background of people and understanding their problems’ (*Herald* 1968, 2). His son Harry recalled that among Jenkins’s most ‘vital bits of equipment’ were the gumboots that he wore to travel to treat many of his patients at their homes on the urban fringe (Jenkins 2020). In establishing and running his own medical practice, he was greatly supported by Wendy, who served as a typist and secretary. Jenkins’s medical work was complemented by his support for schools, hospitals, and other organisations in his local community, including through his membership of the Board of Management of the Preston and Northcote Community Hospital. From

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Figure 34: Dr Harry Jenkins.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

1954 to 1961, he was a major in the army reserve. In 1955 both he and Wendy joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and began to serve the community in local government positions. Wendy held various important positions in the party organisation, including that of secretary to Bill Hartley, the party's state secretary.

During the 1960s, Jenkins 'phased himself out of his medical practice' in favour of his principal interest, politics; practising in 'Collins Street never appealed to me', he reflected (*Herald* 1968, 2). On 15 July 1961, he was elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly for the seat of Reservoir, and thereafter rose through the state parliamentary ranks to become shadow minister for health. He attracted opponents within the ALP for his association with the socialist left faction of the Victorian branch of the party and, by the late 1960s, he could see no further opportunity for advancement at the state level. He later explained that he saw the Legislative Assembly as a 'training ground' (*Herald* 1968, 2) for a federal seat, which would be a better match for his policy interests. He joined the party's federal health policy and social welfare committees; Gough Whitlam later recalled Jenkins's involvement in discussions in 1967 that began the policy process that eventually led to the universal health scheme known as Medibank, which commenced in 1975.

In November 1968, Jenkins defeated Frank Courtney, the member for the recently abolished federal electorate of Darebin, in a preselection contest for the newly created seat of Scullin in Melbourne's working-class north. His son Harry recalled that this federal preselection contest was 'muddier' than his state preselection (Jenkins 2020). He coveted the health portfolio, but, despite press speculation, he did not go on to become a minister in the Whitlam government. By early 1974, he found himself having to deny reports that he would vacate Scullin for the Australian Council of Trade Unions president Bob Hawke. These rumours became so persistent that, in August 1975, he told the House that Hawke had personally assured him that he was not their source. They were likely fuelled in part by rumours about Jenkins's health. Early in his federal career, he was diagnosed with Kennedy's disease, a disorder of the motor neurones that steadily worsened.

During the Whitlam years, Jenkins instead gained experience that helped equip him for the Speakership. In March 1973, he was elected Deputy Chairman of Committees. His service on parliamentary committees included chairing during 1975 the Joint Select Committee on the Parliamentary Committee System, which had been established two years earlier to consider recommendations for a balanced system of committees for the parliament. On 19 August 1975, following Joe Berinson's elevation to the ministry, Jenkins was elected Chairman of Committees. Witnessing the events of the Whitlam dismissal in November 1975 and the devastation of the ALP at the subsequent election, Jenkins remained 'very much a realist' (Jenkins 2020) about the government's electoral prospects. Though he formally lost the Chairmanship in March 1976 following the advent of Malcolm Fraser's government, he again served

as Deputy Chairman of Committees. During these difficult years for the ALP, he was also chairman of the parliamentary Labor Party and secretary of the caucus (1976–78).

Following the 1980 federal election, Jenkins was nominated in the House for the Speakership by his party colleagues Gordon Scholes and John Kerin, the latter praising his 'dignity, impartiality, consistency and control' (H.R. Deb. 25.11.1980, 5). Although Jenkins lost along party lines to the incumbent, Sir Billy Snedden, the ballot helped establish his claim to the position. Following the election of the Hawke government in 1983, Jenkins stood against Les Johnson in the caucus ballot for the Speakership; he won largely due to support from the left and centre-left factions, and especially from the deposed leader Bill Hayden. When the thirty-third parliament opened on 21 April 1983, Jenkins was elected by the House unopposed. Snedden, the outgoing Speaker, in congratulating Jenkins, announced his intention to follow Westminster convention and resign at once from the House, particularly as he feared that his further presence in the chamber would amount to a 'continual auditing' (Mannix 1983) of the new Speaker. Jenkins was himself attracted to a Westminster-style Speakership but felt that its adoption in Australia was 'quite a way in the future' (Livingstone 1985).

Jenkins's occupancy of the chair coincided with an ascendant Labor government. Given past rumours about his making way for Hawke and their opposing factional loyalties, the relationship between the new Speaker and the new prime minister remained cool. Hawke scorned suggestions by Jenkins's predecessor that the Speaker should have the honour of laying the foundation stone for the new parliament building: 'I wasn't prepared to imagine that Harry Jenkins, our Speaker, would have any Snedden-like pretensions' (Hawke 1994, 444). Jenkins's son later recalled that his father and Senate President Doug McClelland were somewhat disappointed by this outcome, as might be expected from the parliament's chosen presiding officers. As Speaker, Jenkins was nonetheless chair of the Joint Standing Committee on the New Parliament House, which advised on the construction and fitting out of the new parliamentary buildings. In particular, he sought to ensure that 'members who actually knew how they used the building were asked how it should operate' (Jenkins 2020).

Jenkins soon developed a reputation for calm and an ability to defuse tension in the House, but still faced pressure from an opposition striving to gain ground against a confident new government. On 28 March 1984, the opposition directed a question without notice to one of their own, Jim Carlton, regarding the timing of his introduction of a bill to amend existing health legislation. When Carlton's answer turned to matters of policy debate and Jenkins withdrew the call from him, the opposition leader, Andrew Peacock, moved a dissent motion in which he accused Jenkins of making an 'absolute mockery' (H.R. Deb. 28.3.1984, 930) of the standing orders. On 29 May 1984, the prime minister answered a question without

notice seemingly with the aid of notes, but when asked by the opposition to table them asserted that he had not in fact quoted from any document, and he received support from the Speaker. Peacock soon after told Hawke: ‘Don’t start appealing to Mr Speaker. He has looked after you once today’ (H.R. Deb. 29.5.1984, 2297).

Two months later, Peacock protested against the Speaker’s decision to name John Howard for repeated interjections directed at the finance minister, John Dawkins, during question time. There was considerable confusion as to whether or not it was appropriate for Peacock to do so, given that the House had affirmed the naming by voting to eject Howard for twenty-four hours. In September 1984, Peacock described Hawke as ‘this little crook’ (H.R. Deb. 13.9.1984, 1252), but, at the Speaker’s direction, immediately withdrew this uncharacteristic accusation; Hawke recalled such language as having ‘appalled both sides of the House’ (Hawke 1994, 269). One of the more remarkable and well-remembered breaches of House decorum occurred on the night of 25 November 1985, when someone dressed as a chicken entered the chamber and sat on the ministerial bench. The Speaker refused to name the culprit—widely thought to have been Bruce Goodluck, the Liberal member for the Tasmanian seat of Franklin. The next day, Jenkins professed ‘disgust that any honourable member would show so little respect for the institution’ (H.R. Deb. 26.11.1985, 3647).

Jenkins had some success with the reform of parliamentary broadcasting practices—‘one of the major innovations’ (Livingstone 1985) of his Speakership. In August 1984, Treasurer Paul Keating delivered the first televised budget speech, followed soon after by Peacock’s budget reply. At the end of his tenure, Jenkins drew on the recent successful broadcasting of budget speeches in favouring ‘a unit which continuously televised both houses, with various media outlets able to use what they wanted’ (Livingstone 1985), despite his suspicion that this would not improve parliamentary speeches. This very liberal approach to parliamentary broadcasting would, in time, become reality. As Speaker, he strove to maintain the importance of the parliamentary committee system, drawing directly on his own membership of committees. He strongly advocated a parliamentary education office to be accommodated in the new Parliament House. His son recalled that Jenkins felt ‘very fortunate to be involved’ (Jenkins 2020) in these developments.

While serving as Speaker, the intellectually curious Jenkins completed an arts degree at Deakin University (BA, 1984). On 20 December 1985, the prime minister phoned to offer him the post of ambassador to Spain. He reportedly took just minutes to accept, signalling a sudden end to more than twenty-four years of parliamentary service. The decision may have been influenced by his general health. A staff member recalled occasionally having to give him ‘a little bit of a push’ (Adamson 2008) up stairways and on to aircraft because of his physical difficulties. Others recalled that he experienced minor difficulty ‘getting in and out of the Chair’ (Jenkins 2020).

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The fierce preselection battle for Scullin that followed was eventually won by his son Harry, who went on to win the by-election for this safe ALP seat on 8 February 1986. In Spain, the ambassadorial lifestyle required Jenkins to adjust to 'being looked after by domestic staff and having a large residence' (*Canberra Times* 1986, 2)—not an easy transition for someone who had not forgotten his working-class origins. The former Speaker enjoyed his ambassadorship and promoted the bilateral trade relationship between Australia and Spain wherever possible. Continuing health problems resulted in his premature return to Australia in 1988.

Jenkins once remarked that Speakers would 'go mad without a sense of humour' (Livingstone 1985). His presence as a 'huge, ambling man' amplified his 'openly friendly face' (*Herald* 1968, 2) that aptly signalled his amiable nature. In 1991 he was appointed AM and, in 2001, he received a Centenary Medal. During his retirement, he remained committed to his family and his longstanding membership of the Lions International Club, but his health continued to deteriorate. In his final years, he was devotedly nursed by Wendy, before his death on 27 July 2004. Jenkins's former political colleague Kim Beazley said that he was a Speaker

who had such a profound belief in the good that the chamber of the House of Representatives could do in itself, for the ordinary citizen of Australia, by being the sort of chamber that teased out the essence of every issue that it considered, teasing it out because ordinary members of parliament were well treated. (H.R. Deb. 4.8.2004, 32198)

His portrait by Wesley Walters hangs in Parliament House.

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