

Johnson, Sir William Elliot: Speaker 1913–1914, 1917–1922

G. N. Hawker

Sir William Elliot Johnson (1862–1932), fourth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 10 April 1862 at Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, son of John Ellis Johnson, scene painter, and his wife, Mary, née Nutsforde. Elliot came to Sydney as a ship's steward after an adventurous youth. The details of his early life are unclear but were widely rumoured to have included experience of shipwrecks and service as a mercenary in the 1879–84 War of the Pacific that involved Chile, Peru and Bolivia. On 29 June 1881, in Sydney, he married Marie McLachlan, a dressmaker from Scotland.

An early adherent of the political economist Henry George, Johnson, throughout his career, supported a single tax on unimproved land values. Until the mid-1890s, he was active in labour circles and in 1894 stood unsuccessfully for the emerging Labor Party in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, but he left when he saw the party take a socialist turn. He became honorary secretary of the Free Trade and Liberal Association of New South Wales and, though opposed to Federation, he was in 1903 elected as a free-trader for the federal seat of Lang. He described himself on entry to parliament as a 'gentleman' and on electoral rolls in his later years as an 'artist (MHR)'.

None of the various political organisations that Johnson joined provided a fully comfortable fit with his personal views. He maintained a mixture of radicalism and conformism through changing party titles and policies. A democrat committed to equal opportunity, justice, and liberty for all, he attacked socialism, collectivism, and government intervention, as well as employers' federations and capitalist concentrations of wealth. The protectionist policies of the 1920s were obnoxious to him, even though they were increasingly espoused by the Nationalist Party he represented.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

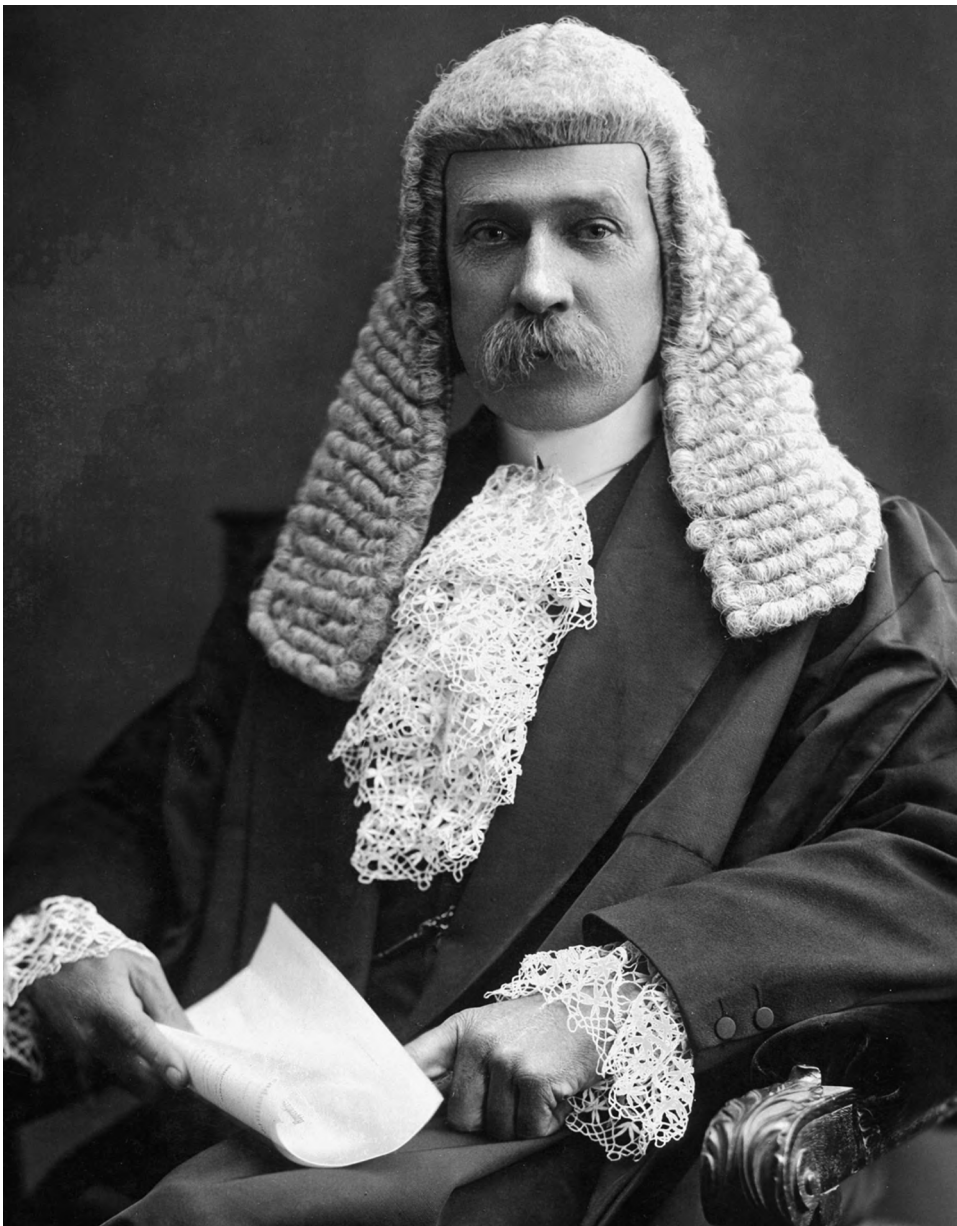


Figure 37: Elliot Johnson.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

Parliament was a natural forum for the loquacious Johnson. His individualistic style rarely brought him into contention as a minister, but his warmth and tolerance won him friends across the parliament. He was a Temporary Chairman of Committees in the fourth session of the third parliament (1909) and in all three sessions of the fourth (1910–12). His pride in English parliamentary democracy encompassed the symbolism of the mace and Speaker's wig, occasioning some opposition when he became Speaker. In 1911, he attended the coronation of King George V as a member of the Australian parliamentary delegation and became one of the founders of the Empire Parliamentary Association and honorary secretary of its Australian branch.

In July 1913, Prime Minister Joseph Cook and the Liberal Party proposed Johnson for the Speakership. Many observers thought this was because he could be relied upon when only one vote separated the government and the opposition, which implied that the Speaker might frequently have to exercise a casting vote in the government's favour. Johnson was formally nominated in the House by (Sir) Granville Ryrie, the member for Warringah, who instead simply suggested jovially that Johnson was certain to be impartial and was 'a close student of politics' (H. R. Deb. 9.7.1913, 22), a reference to his heterodox past.

Johnson's personal qualities and experience as Temporary Chairman of Committees helped to make him a successful Speaker in difficult circumstances. His decision to avoid party meetings did not prevent the Labor opposition from trying during the first session of the parliament every procedural device it could find to catch the government short, attempting motions of censure and dissent from the chair and refusing pairs. The address-in-reply required Johnson's first use of a casting vote, to negate an opposition amendment regretting that the governor-general's advisers proposed to 'destroy the beneficial character of our social and industrial laws' (VP 1913/43, 4.9.1913). In delivering his vote, Johnson observed simply: 'The new Government has so far not been afforded an opportunity to submit any of its proposed legislative measures for the consideration and judgment of the House' (VP 1913/44, 4.9.1913).

Voting when the House was in committee was similarly often close. Johnson aroused controversy by voting as a member in ten such divisions on a bill to restore postal voting. He defended his action by reference to Westminster practice and other precedents, including pointing out that his predecessor as Speaker, Charles McDonald, had voted in committee during the previous parliament. One of Johnson's votes ensured that the question would be put to test his right to vote in committee, but in the event he did not vote on this himself, as W. G. Higgs, the Labor member for Capricornia, unexpectedly decided to support the right of a Speaker to do so.

The government's position in the chamber temporarily improved after 11 November 1913 when Cook raised, as a matter of privilege, remarks impugning the impartiality of the Speaker reportedly made by Charles McGrath, the Labor member for Ballarat

(as it was then spelt). McGrath refused to apologise, and debate on his suspension from the House proceeded through the day and past midnight. Many allegations were made against Johnson, including his supposed alteration of *Hansard* proofs. The proceedings appear to have included an element of confected rage; Higgs conceded that 'it was my intention not to worry him [the Speaker] so much as to worry the Ministerialists' (H. R. Deb. 11.11.1913, 3032). The Labor member for Brisbane, W. F. Finlayson, attempted to reassure Johnson that 'any remarks we may make are directed towards you in your official position as Speaker, and not in your private capacity as an individual' (H. R. Deb. 11.11.1913, 3049). In the final division, Higgs again refrained from voting with his party, though later in the session he and Johnson clashed repeatedly. McGrath's suspension for the remainder of the session gave the government slight respite, as no further divisions were tied in this first session. But the rowdy second session, when McGrath was restored to the chamber, featured Higgs and another opposition member stealing the mace and the Speaker's copy of May's *Parliamentary Practice* before confessing. A select committee inquiry into this failed to produce any notable result.

Later perceptions about the fifth parliament to the contrary, Johnson used his casting vote in only ten of sixty-nine divisions. In the first session, his vote supported the government three times, though twenty divisions were still determined by a single vote. In the second session, he used his casting vote seven times, including once when he negated a government motion to close debate, thereby following a precedent that the Speaker should invariably vote for further discussion.

When Labor won the 1914 election, Johnson was again nominated as Speaker but, unsurprisingly, was defeated by McDonald along party lines, 41 to 26 (VP 1914/4–5, 8.10.1914). In turn, Johnson resumed the Speakership in the wake of the sweeping Nationalist win at the 1917 election. His unanimous re-election by the House was followed by the immediate restoration of the mace, which had been banned from the chamber by McDonald, to its traditional place on the table. 'Honourable members'—that is, government supporters—responded with 'three cheers for the King, and sang a verse of the National Anthem' (H. R. Deb. 14.6.1917, 23). Prime Minister William Morris Hughes offered congratulations, claiming hyperbolically that it was 'the first time in the history of the House that the Speaker has been chosen unanimously without election' (H. R. Deb. 14.6.1917, 23), ignoring four previous such uncontested elections, including Johnson's in 1913. Hughes and Johnson were coevals in more than age, the bond between them probably owing something to the time thirty years before when both were free-trade labourites espousing Georgist principles in the suburbs of Sydney.

Johnson's re-election as Speaker following the 1919 election was less smooth, as the government's loss of seats encouraged the opposition to contest the position. He still won easily, securing 46 votes against 21 for the member for Dalley, W. G. Mahony

(VP 1920/4–5, 26.2.1920). Johnson may have been pleased to be nominated by Hector Lamond—by then a fellow Nationalist but formerly Johnson's defeated opponent in contests for the seat of Lang in 1913 and 1914. The debate before the vote was protracted, and comments afterwards continued for two hours, with many members lamenting the conditions and pay of parliamentary staff. Johnson responded defensively that he knew 'nothing of any officers of the House having been sweated, and, as a matter of fact, few public servants have, on the whole, as easy a time as the attendants of the Parliament' (H.R. Deb. 26.2.1920, 39). In 1920, he was appointed KCMG.

The status of parliamentary staff remained a major issue during the early 1920s as the public service commissioner sought to bring them within the terms of an amended Public Service Act and the Economies Commission, appointed to examine Commonwealth expenditures, proposed reductions in numbers and salaries. Johnson and the Senate President, Thomas Givens, were largely successful in resisting such pressures, though later scholars judged that the 'basic principle of parliamentary independence' dwindled in this period to become 'little more, in administrative terms, than the power of the Presiding Officers to control the day-to-day work of their departmental staff' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 427). Nevertheless, Johnson developed a reputation as a determined exponent of the rights of the parliamentary staff and of the parliament generally, and looked likely to eclipse Holder's tenure of eight years.

He was, however, summarily replaced with William Watt when parliament opened in February 1923. The new prime minister, Stanley (Viscount) Bruce, wanted the potentially unpredictable Watt off the floor; the Speakership was a convenient way to do so. Johnson at first downplayed his dismay and spoke merely of a 'little political episode' when opening a Salvation Army home for aged women in his electorate, averring that 'he was not going to kick' as it was 'essential at the present time to stabilise the Government' (*Argus* 1923, 9). He continued as vice-president of his party's National Association in 1923 and won re-election to parliament in 1925.

In the mid-1920s, Johnson built a home at the newly constructed Castlecrag in Sydney, neighbouring the designers of this unique suburb, Marion and Walter Burley Griffin. During his final term in parliament, his commitment to politics appears to have waned. In his pre-Speakership years, his daily attendance in the House exceeded 90 per cent; as Speaker, he was absent only following the death of his wife on 28 July 1920 and in May–September 1921 when he was seriously ill. But during his last session in parliament he was absent for more than a quarter of sitting days, suggesting either some release from the tensions of politics or defeat foreseen. At his tenth federal election, in 1928, he was unable to resist the Labor tide and lost his seat. His record as Speaker was recognised by later commentators as 'excellent' (Sawer 1956, 225 n. 22) and 'perfectly able' (Souter 1988, 196). There is no reason to contest these judgements.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Johnson died on 8 December 1932 at Geelong, while visiting his only child, Florence May. Born an Anglican, he was buried at Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney, as a Presbyterian. A portrait by Florence Rodway hangs in Parliament House. Johnson was himself an artist of talent and an amateur photographer, and the National Library of Australia holds a collection of his works.

This article supplements the original Volume 9 ADB biography, published 1983, authored by G. N. Hawker. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/johnson-sir-william-elliott-6858/text11879

Select bibliography

Argus (Melbourne). 'Federal Situation'. 6 November 1913, 9

Argus (Melbourne). 'Election of Speaker'. 5 March 1923, 9

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 July 1913, 22

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 5 November 1913, 2907–12

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 11 November 1913, 2982–3053

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 April 1915, 2729–49

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 June 1917, 21–23

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 26 February 1920, 29–44

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1909, 15

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1910, 25

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1911, 4

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1912, 3

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1913, 44

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1914, 4–5, 48–53, 84

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1914–15, 181

Australia. House of Representatives. *Votes and Proceedings*, 1920, 4–5

Makin, Norman. The Honourable William Elliot Johnson KCMG, c. 1962. Papers of Norman Makin, MS 4663. National Library of Australia

Reid, G. S., and Martyn Forrest. *Australia's Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1988: Ten Perspectives*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1989

Sawer, Geoffrey. *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1901–1929*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1956

Smith, A. N. *Thirty Years: The Commonwealth of Australia, 1901–1931*. Melbourne: Brown, Prior & Co., 1933

Souter, Gavin. *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of the Senate and the House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988

Sydney Morning Herald. 'Sir E. Johnson'. 9 December 1932, 12

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.2023.35