

Lucock, Philip Ernest: Chairman of Committees 1961–1972, 1976–1977

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Philip Ernest Lucock (1916–96), Presbyterian minister and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 16 January 1916 at Eltham, Kent, second of three surviving children of British-born parents Grace Miriam Lucock, née Bishop, and her husband, Alan. Grace had been apprenticed to a London dressmaker before marrying; Alan worked as a shell gauger at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, but later opened a women's hairdressing salon. Both were strong supporters of the British Liberal Party. In 1923, the Lucocks migrated to New Zealand, residing successively at Dunedin, Timaru, and Christchurch. Philip and his elder brother's involvement with the local youth wing of the Presbyterian fellowship prompted the entire family's conversion to Presbyterianism.

In his new country, Lucock enjoyed sport, especially cricket, and attended an elite state school, Timaru Boys' High (1929), and Christchurch Technical College (1930–31). His father's hairdressing salons at Timaru and Christchurch suffered during the Depression, resulting in Philip's leaving school at age fourteen. He assisted in his father's salons, then worked at a Christchurch service station before a prominent local Presbyterian, (Sir) James Hay, offered him a sales job at his department store in Christchurch. In 1937, he moved to Sydney after chancing on an advertisement for a sales position with Anthony Hordern & Sons Ltd and successfully applying. Within months of his arrival, he decided to join the Presbyterian ministry and, in 1939, commenced as a home missionary at Paterson in the lower Hunter Valley of New South Wales, combining theological training with employment by the church.

The outbreak of World War II interrupted Lucock's studies. He felt obliged to contribute to the fight against Nazism, but, as his religious training was incomplete, he was ineligible to be appointed as a military chaplain. He instead applied to join the Royal Australian Air Force in November 1939 but only commenced service

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Figure 38: Philip Lucock.

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1200, L48966.

in July 1941. After initial training at Somers, Victoria, he was sent to Rhodesia in November 1941 for pilot training. Suspected haematuria and renal calculus resulted in his being sent home four months later, and, eventually, his discharge in August 1942 as a leading aircraftman.

On 5 August 1942, Lucock married Margaret Joan Dixon, a nurse he had met before the war, at Paterson. He became a home missionary at Wollomombi, northern New South Wales (1943–45), where the first of their four children, a son, was born. The family moved to the Sydney suburb of Blacktown in 1945. There, he was again a home missionary while concurrently studying at St Andrew's Theological Hall (1945–47). He was subsequently a home missionary at Wingham on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, and was ordained in January 1948 and inducted into the parish of Upper Manning as its minister.

Politics had been regularly discussed in Lucock's family, and he particularly recalled his father's 'very strong views' on 'the rights of the individual and the freedom of everybody' (Lucock 1985). He was later also exposed to rural ideals of self-reliance and the national importance of primary industry. While at Wollomombi, he had joined the Country Party, becoming local branch secretary. He was not concerned that membership raised any tensions with his commitment to the church as he 'was in an area where 99 per cent of the congregation were members of that political party' (Lucock 1985). At Blacktown, however, he joined the Liberal Party, reasoning that the coalition parties were united by a shared philosophy and opposition to the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Despite being liberal on theological matters, he remained conservative on moral issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

An increase in the size of the House of Representatives in 1949 created the new seat of Lyne, which encompassed the Manning Valley and surrounds. Lucock was approached by the Country Party to stand for Lyne, and, as party rules then allowed multiple candidates, he became one of four party nominees. The seat was won by the Legislative Council member and former Country Party state chairman Eldred James Eggin, with Lucock coming third in the primary vote out of a field of six candidates. He returned to his ministry and became a director of radio station 2RE at Taree, from which he began weekly broadcasts on devotional matters and international affairs.

Eggin's death in January 1952 gave Lucock a second chance at federal politics. He declined an approach from the Liberal Party, and instead won the ensuing by-election for the Country Party. His first speech in the House of Representatives reflected his longstanding interests in primary industry and foreign affairs. He pictured Australia as being placed firmly within the imperial fold, but 'experiencing growing pains as our nation goes forward to take its place among the great nations of the world' (H.R. Deb. 7.5.1952, 113). Subsequently, he participated in several parliamentary delegations, including to the United Nations General Assembly (1957), and to meetings of the assembly of the Asian Parliamentarians' Union in

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Seoul, South Korea (1966), and Bangkok, Thailand (1967). Lucock was also a regular participant in Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conferences; in 1979, he led the Australian delegation to the conference held in Wellington.

To Lucock's surprise, in February 1956, the Speaker, Archie Cameron, appointed him as a Temporary Chairman of Committees. He performed well, and was elected Chairman of Committees on 8 March 1961, succeeding the Country Party's George Bowden. As Chairman, Lucock emphasised the primacy of parliament and its traditions. He described the Speaker's role as that of 'protector of the Member, be it Government or Opposition', but added that 'the House is more important than the individual' (Lucock 1985). Although he did not always approve of opposition tactics, he accepted its disruption of House business as a legitimate tool; indeed, one of the challenges he faced was ensuring that 'the government doesn't ride roughshod over the Opposition' (Lucock 1985).

The opposition valued Lucock's fair-mindedness. Its leader, Arthur Calwell, welcomed his election, as the Labor Party had 'no reason to take great umbrage at his rulings' in his previous role as Temporary Chairman of Committees (H.R. Deb. 8.3.1961, 26). Lucock's impartiality was reflected in some notable rulings. On 10 September 1969, as Acting Speaker, he allowed the opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, to answer a question during question time. When replying to a question, the minister for health, Jim Forbes, rhetorically insisted that Whitlam explain his position on a public health scheme. In a bold tactical manoeuvre, Gordon Scholes, a future Speaker, followed Forbes's attack by addressing his question to Whitlam, asking him to clarify Labor's stance (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1969, 1031). Lucock ruled in favour of Scholes by referring to Forbes's own demand (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1969, 1031–32). As the debate continued, Lucock dismissed challenges from the leader of the House, Dudley Erwin, by succinctly stating that 'if the House disagrees with that, there is one action which the House can take' (H.R. Deb. 10.9.1969, 1032).

Inevitably, Lucock also had some robust exchanges with the opposition. In April 1966, he ruled that Prime Minister Harold Holt was not obliged to table a letter concerning conscripts serving in Vietnam from which he had just quoted. The opposition responded that, as the letter did not appear to be confidential, it was not exempt from tabling. Calwell alleged that Lucock was simply trying to protect the prime minister. Lucock was not helped by Holt's clarification that the letter in question was anonymous (H.R. Deb. 19.4.1966, 894–99), creating an uproar within the chamber.

Three years later, Lucock became embroiled in a long debate about whether accusations in the chamber addressed to groups of members—in this case, a suggestion that the ALP was in alliance with the Communist Party—were offensive, ruling that 'only a statement referring to a particular individual in the House can be claimed to be offensive' (H.R. Deb. 23.4.1969, 1375). Some Labor members responded by

rhetorically questioning whether members of the coalition parties could be described as ‘collectively Fascists with Nazi intentions’ (H.R. Deb. 23.4.1969, 1392–93). On 26 August 1971, Lucock had to adjourn the House early after a failure to meet the quorum requirement. During the day Labor had repeatedly called for a quorum; on the fifth such occasion, he conducted a series of counts of members. Some Labor members strategically stayed outside the chamber, evidently hoping to embarrass the government of (Sir) William McMahon. The government failed to muster the numbers required, despite some members banging on the doors after they had been locked.

Lucock nonetheless maintained his esteem for the Westminster parliamentary tradition, reflecting after his retirement that ‘with all its faults, with all its difficulties ... [it] is still the only system that is really giving the best and noblest and the most logical system of government to the people’ (Lucock 1985). After spending the Whitlam years on the backbench, he welcomed the reintroduction of the Speaker’s wig and robes by (Sir) Billy Snedden following the coalition’s return to office in 1975. Lucock argued that, rather than being ‘a trapping of power’, they constituted a ‘covering up of the personality so that the office is the thing that really counts’ (Lucock 1985). His conservatism extended to hoping that parliament would never be televised, given the ‘not really interesting’ (Lucock 1985) nature of most parliamentary business.

Increasingly, Lucock feared that the chain of accountability between governments and voters was under threat from growing executive control of parliament. Shortly after his re-election as Chairman of Committees in February 1976, he implored the House that ‘every one of us must remember that the most vital and important functions that we have to fulfil in this place are our responsibility to the electorate, to the people who are our masters’ (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1976, 24–25). During this debate, Whitlam repudiated a comment made by his party colleague Gordon Bryant that Lucock was ‘a remarkably slow learner of the rights and duties of the people for whom he deliberates’; Whitlam instead observed that ‘in the company he has to keep ... [Lucock] shines like a good deed in a naughty world’ (H.R. Deb. 17.2.1976, 23).

A few months later, Lucock allowed Labor’s Horace Garrick to make a personal explanation during question time after Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser had suggested that Garrick supported violent demonstrations. The ruling was justified on the grounds that ‘when an honourable member claims to have been misrepresented the personal explanation should be made as close as possible to the time of the alleged misrepresentation’ (H.R. Deb. 7.9.1976, 711), and insisted that Fraser’s withdrawal of his allegation be without qualification. Lucock greatly valued courtesy and decorum. During one particularly lively debate, he described conduct in the chamber as ‘disgraceful’ and warned that ‘if there is any more behaviour along that line I will immediately leave this Chair’ (H.R. Deb. 6.5.1976, 2063). He also chastised some

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members for walking in front of their colleagues when they were addressing the chair: 'You wouldn't do that kind of thing in your own home, or at least I hope you wouldn't' (H.R. Deb. 20.10.1977, 2261).

The opening of the thirty-first parliament in February 1978 marked the end of Lucock's service as Chairman of Committees. His re-election was opposed by elements of his own party, and he subsequently lost the vote in the House. This came as a surprise to him, and he struggled for an explanation beyond a suspicion that some party colleagues disagreed 'that I was a servant of the House and had to protect the Opposition just as much as I protected members of the government' (Lucock 1985). He was unable to attend parliament during the vote due to the hospitalisation of his wife. Although the opposition nominated him, there was confusion as to whether he accepted the nomination, particularly as Snedden did not read out Lucock's confirming telegram until after the ballot was complete.

Outside the Chairmanship, Lucock was only rarely the subject of headlines. In 1969, he conducted the ceremony when Harold Holt's widow, Zara, married Jeff Bate, the member for Macarthur. Lucock was appointed CBE in 1971. The collapse of the Life Funds Company in 1972, of which he was a director, was the subject of a probe brought on by a Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, but it came to little. He retained a robust sense of independence and, by the end of his political career, he had crossed the floor to vote against his own party on five occasions. When he retired from parliament at the 1980 election, he was the longest-serving Chairman of Committees—a total of thirteen years and five months. The opposition's Lionel Bowen remarked appreciatively that Lucock's 'somewhat gentle' approach to politics included 'the compassion ... of understanding all the problems of human behaviour' (H.R. Deb. 18.9.1980, 1564).

Of heavy build, Lucock was blessed with a resonant voice that was a decided advantage in the chair, and a genial manner that contributed to his popularity in Lyne. In retirement, he resumed a strong personal engagement with the Presbyterian Church, becoming moderator of the church in New South Wales (1981–82) and, in 1987, a member of the council of the Presbyterian Ladies' College, Armidale. He also continued his longstanding work with Rotary Australia. On 8 August 1996, he died at a Brisbane nursing home, survived by his children. His wife predeceased him.

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