

# **Millar, Percival Clarence (Clarrie): Chairman of Committees 1978–1983**

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Percival Clarence ‘Clarrie’ Millar (1925–2017), public servant, farmer, and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born at Norwood, South Australia, on 15 June 1925, second of three children of South Australian-born parents Percival John Turbill, clerk, salesman, and tram driver-conductor, and his wife, Elsie Dorothy Gladys, née Klæbe. Clarrie’s father died of tuberculosis on 29 July 1935. After his mother married William Donald Millar, he adopted his stepfather’s surname and, with his family, followed an itinerant life across Victoria and Tasmania, finally settling in Hobart. A child of the ‘infamous depression of the Thirties’ (H.R. Deb. 18.7.1974, 432), he left school at thirteen and worked in various jobs, including as a trainee in the assay department of the Rosebery zinc mine, and as a salesman in a Hobart department store. In 1940 he passed a post office examination and became a messenger, delivering telegrams to the families of war casualties. He also served at the public counter, learnt Morse code, and became a junior assistant telegraphist.

Millar joined the Royal Australian Air Force at South Hobart on 27 September 1943. As he was only eighteen, his mother refused him permission to learn to fly. However, his telegraphic skills led him instead to spend two and a half years as a radio operator—a ‘modest radio spy’ (H.R. Deb. 1.3.1989, 234)—with the Central Bureau, a joint American–Australian code-breaking organisation that provided signals intelligence. After further training, he was based in Brisbane and then at a secret location near Darwin, where he intercepted the Japanese message that ended the war in August 1945. His superiors described him as well-spoken and conscientious.

Discharged on 27 March 1946 with the rank of leading aircraftman, Millar worked in the telegraph section of the Sydney General Post Office and studied for his matriculation. In 1948 he joined the Department of Immigration. On 26 June that year, at St Swithun’s Church of England, Pymble, he married Dorothy Lucy Cooper.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 47: Clarrie Millar.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K22/8/74/43.

They were to have two sons, Robert and David, and three daughters, Wendy, Lisa, and Trudi. In 1950 the Millars relocated to Queensland where Clarrie, with his stepfather and brother John, operated a dairy farm at Biloela in the Callide Valley. The farm encountered financial difficulties, and five years later the family moved to Brisbane, where Millar worked as a real estate salesman before buying a dairy farm at Kilkivan, west of Gympie. He loved the land and became an innovative farmer, practising soil conservation and strip grazing, and improving his herd by artificial insemination. A long-held interest in aviation led him in 1969 to finally learn to fly, using an airstrip on his property and his own light plane.

The community-minded Millar was active in the Queensland Dairymen's Organisation, the Kilkivan United Grand Lodge, and the Kilkivan State School Parents and Citizens Association. Increasingly drawn to politics, he served as president of the Country Party's Wide Bay Divisional Council (1971–74) and as deputy chairman of the Barambah Electorate Council (1971–74), before becoming chairman of the Kilkivan Branch of the Country Party in 1974. Displeased by the Whitlam Labor government, he agreed to stand for the federal seat of Wide Bay, which was held by Labor's Brendan Hansen. Although he was a surprise candidate and was subjected to the Labor campaign slogan 'Clarrie Who?', rising dissatisfaction with Whitlam in rural Queensland contributed to his victory at the double-dissolution election of May 1974. He was to retain the seat at six further elections.

In his first speech to the House of Representatives, Miller attributed his tolerance and concern for the underdog to his early exposure to hardship. Twenty-five years of freedom from 'the spectres of fear, hunger and poverty' (H.R. Deb. 18.7.1974, 432) had, he felt, fostered national complacency. Defending primary producers—'the peasantry of the seventies'—he pointed to the collapse of the beef market, the amalgamation of farms, and townships 'doomed to die because of the imbalance of social and economic entitlements' (H.R. Deb. 18.7.1974, 433). While committed to free enterprise, he recognised 'the interdependence of all sections of Australian society' (H.R. Deb. 18.7.1974, 433). In the sixteen years of parliamentary service that followed, he proved willing to raise difficult questions and spoke eloquently, usually without notes. A lifetime of reading had endowed him with such a love of language that he 'never used a single word when a whole paragraph would do' (Truss 2018). He spoke on his constituents' interests of dairying, fishing, sugar, timber, irrigation, fertilisers, and transport, especially aviation. When in 1977 the Fraser government prevented further sandmining on Fraser Island, within his electorate, Millar, no fan of 'academic oriented conservationists' (H.R. Deb. 18.7.1974, 435), secured a major compensation package for the affected community. His efforts for Wide Bay were honoured by the naming of the P. C. Millar Bridge on a new road between Maryborough and Tin Can Bay.

Millar's even temperament contributed to his election on 21 February 1978 as Chairman of Committees, controversially replacing the long-serving Philip Lucock, who had hoped to continue in the position. Millar's rise seemed 'meteoric, considering his previous party positions were at the branch and divisional levels and that he has not held a Deputy Chairman of Committees position during his four years in Parliament' (*Canberra Times* 1978, 11). As Deputy Speaker, Millar presided with competence, decorum, and fairness, seldom raising his voice. On 13 September 1979, amid angry exchanges between the opposition and the government, as Acting Speaker, he ruled that the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, should terminate his extended answer to a question—an act of impartiality that won him 'enduring respect on both sides of the Parliament' (*Gympie Times* 1991, 1; H.R. Deb. 13.9.1979, 1069–72). Yet Millar came to see the Speaker's chair as 'the hottest and loneliest seat in Australia' (H.R. Deb. 11.2.1986, 237). He retained the Chairman of Committees position after the 1980 election and served until the Labor victory at the election of March 1983, after which he became Deputy Chairman of Committees.

In February 1984, following the resignation of Les Johnson, Millar was unsuccessfully proposed as Chairman of Committees by the Liberal member for Cook, Don Dobie, who declared that Millar's knowledge of standing orders was such that 'he has no peer among the rest of us' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1984, 6). This prompted a sceptical observer to wonder whether 'Millar was a man who combined the saintly temperament of Santa Claus with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Standing Orders' (Warden 1984). Similar attempts in September 1987 and August 1989 were also voted down along party lines. Millar continued to participate diligently in the work of the Joint Statutory Committee of Public Works (1976–77, 1985–90). Other committees he served on had a focus on the operations of the parliament and the House: the Standing Committees on Publications (1974–77), Standing Orders (1978–84), Privileges (1980–90), Procedure (1980–90), and Selection (1988–90). He led parliamentary delegations to Japan (1978) and Suva (1981) and was a member of delegations to South-East Asia (1976), Italy, Spain, Greece, and Cyprus (1983), and to the Philippines and Korea (1988).

The most difficult period of Millar's career began in January 1987 when the Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, launched his divisive 'Joh for Canberra' campaign in an attempt to secure the prime ministership. Although Wide Bay included Bjelke-Petersen's state electorate of Barambah, Millar declined to make way for him. He was nonetheless among those National Party members who opposed maintaining the coalition with the Liberals and were critical of Ian Sinclair's party leadership. In May 1989, he and four other opposition members crossed the floor over amendments to a bill concerning deregulation of the Australian Wheat Board. Soon after, he decided that, as fifteen years in parliament had impaired his health, he would not contest the 1990 election. This made possible a smooth transition to his successor, Warren Truss, a future National Party leader. Farewelling Millar, Prime Minister Bob Hawke

praised him as ‘one of the gentlest, most responsible and respected persons in this place’ (H.R. Deb. 22.12.1989, 3571). Millar had been one of just five World War II veterans remaining in the House of Representatives.

In retirement, the Millars lived in Brisbane, staying active and enjoying their close family. On 26 January 1991, he was appointed AM for services to the parliament. In 2009 he received a medallion and certificate from the British prime minister, Gordon Brown, acknowledging his signals intelligence service during World War II. As a Freemason, he received his fifty-year jewel in 2011. Millar died in Brisbane on 28 November 2017. He was cremated at a private family service on 5 December, which his daughter Lisa, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist and presenter, joined from overseas by Skype. A memorial service was held on 10 January 2018 at the Samford Valley Community Church. Despite his concerns about the behaviour of some parliamentarians and the high expectations that a democratic system can raise, he had remained ‘a Parliamentarian, not a politician’ (Truss 2018). With his warmth and wit, Millar was held in high regard in his electorate and on both sides of politics.

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