

Parkes, Ernest William: Clerk 1927–1937

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Ernest William Parkes (1873–1941), fifth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 23 March 1873 at Melbourne, eldest of four children of William Parkes, bootmaker, and his wife Annie, née Hanison, both Irish born. After a state-school education, Ernest joined the Victorian Government Printing Office in October 1887. He transferred to the Victorian Legislative Council in 1894 and acted as Assistant Reader and Assistant Clerk of the Papers from July 1895 until May 1901, when he became Assistant Reading Clerk in the newly established Commonwealth House of Representatives. On 4 November 1902 at St Paul's Church of England, Goorambat, Victoria, he married Susannah Ellen Hall, from Yarrambat, Victoria. She died in April 1925 and, on 31 March 1928, at St Kilda, Melbourne, he married Eliza 'Tottie' Kate Hall, a widow from Benalla, Victoria.

After almost sixteen years as Assistant Reading Clerk, Parkes had three important promotions within a short period: to Reading Clerk (February 1917), to Clerk of the Papers and Reading Clerk (July 1919), and to Clerk of the Records and Assistant Clerk of Committees (April 1921). In February 1925, he was appointed Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees. As Serjeant-at-Arms, he carried the mace while escorting the Duke of York, the future King George VI, from the House of Representatives to the Senate chamber when the Duke opened the provisional Parliament House in Canberra on 9 May 1927.

Following his promotion to Second Clerk Assistant on 1 July that year, Parkes could confidently have seen himself as a strong contender for the post of Clerk of the House of Representatives once a number of his more senior colleagues had retired. However, the prevailing steady process of promotion sped up with tragic and unexpected abruptness during 1927. Two Clerks of the House, Walter Gale and John McGregor, died suddenly, on 27 July and 28 September, respectively. Following Gale's death, Parkes was promoted to Clerk Assistant—effectively Deputy Clerk—replacing McGregor, who had become Clerk. After McGregor died, Parkes succeeded him, on 27 October. In November 1929, the new Speaker, Norman Makin, eschewed

'ORDER, ORDER!'

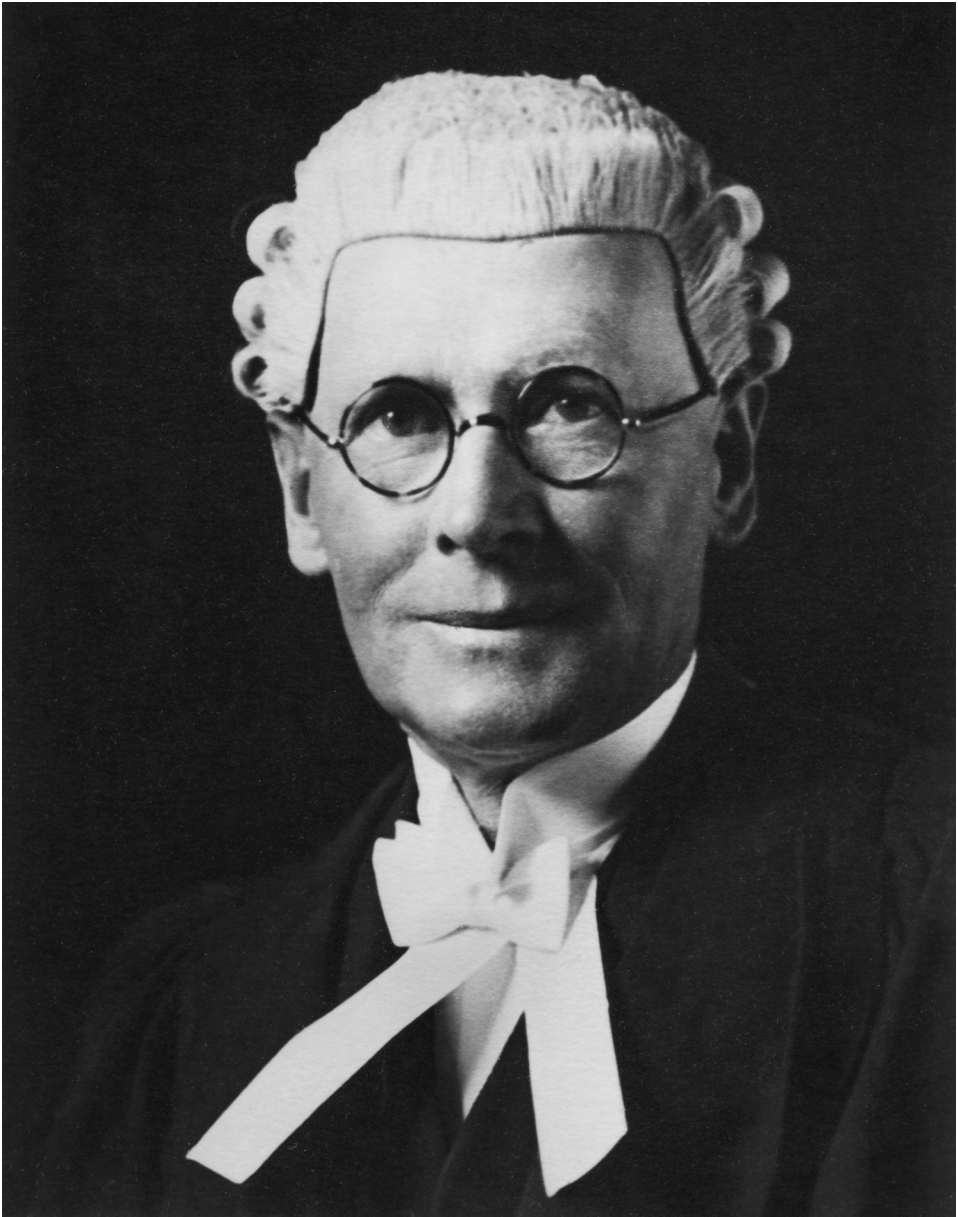


Figure 50: Ernest Parkes.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

the wig, gown, and mace, but allowed the more traditionalist Parkes to continue to don formal dress in the chamber (Elder 2018, 210–11). Parliamentary activity and administration during most of his tenure as Clerk reflected the preoccupation of the Scullin and Lyons governments with the consequences of the Depression. This considerably altered parliamentary priorities as these governments concentrated on stabilising public finances, leading, for example, to a marked decline in House of Representatives committee work throughout the 1930s. Senior officials of the parliamentary departments were called on to devise ways of cutting departmental running costs, raising issues of how many such departments could be afforded, and whether presiding officers or the executive should have the main say in decision-making (Reid and Forrest 1989, 413–14).

As early as 1920 the member for Melbourne, William Maloney, described having five separate parliamentary departments as ‘the acme of folly’ (H.R. Deb. 19.10.1920, 5730). By the early 1930s, the issue of duplication across the departments had become pressing. In August 1932, at the request of the Speaker, George Mackay, and the President of the Senate, (Sir) Walter Kingsmill, the government appointed a Public Service Board inspector, J. T. Pinner, to report on parliamentary administration. Pinner’s principal recommendation was for the central provision of services currently delivered separately by each department. He also recommended a wholesale reclassification of positions within the parliamentary departments, which would have seen most salaries plummet.

However, it was Pinner’s further suggestions that proved most unacceptable. He raised the possible merger of the parliamentary departments into one unit under a single permanent head bearing the title Clerk of Parliaments, responsible to both the Speaker and the President. Existing heads of parliamentary departments, including Parkes were he to remain Clerk, would answer to this new figure. These proposals were contrary to well-established traditions of parliamentary administration. The new President of the Senate, Patrick Lynch, insisted that Pinner did not possess the requisite ‘knowledge of parliamentary procedure’ (S. Deb. 23.6.1933, 2573), while Mackay added that savings called for by Pinner ‘could be made only by restricting facilities at present available to honorable members’ (H.R. Deb. 10.11.1933, 4414). Kingsmill added that Pinner did not appreciate the difference between public servants and parliamentary officers. Some parliamentarians were critical of the presiding officers for permitting the inquiry at all. As Gordon Reid and Martyn Forrest later argued, although Mackay and both Senate Presidents accepted ‘that the Executive had a right to influence the form and the practices of parliamentary administration’, they resisted whenever—as with Pinner’s prescriptions—‘the Executive sought control of the day-to-day workings of the parliamentary staff’ (1989, 414).

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Parkes's preparedness to act decisively to ensure the smooth functioning of the House was most visible during the election of (Sir) George Bell to the Speakership in October 1934. This was delayed by a filibuster by Joseph Gander, who nominated himself as Speaker. His hour-long speech and the refusal of the tellers for the 'no's to act when the House finally voted prompted Parkes as acting chairman to resolve the impasse by declaring the motion decided in favour of the 'ayes'. As Makin later observed, although there was 'a little fuss' over the way Parkes had dealt with the situation, almost all members thought he had acted 'correctly' (c. 1962).

In 1935 Parkes was appointed CMG. He retired on 22 March 1937. He was highly respected by the Speakers and other members whom he had served and by his fellow parliamentary officers at home and abroad. The acting prime minister, (Sir) Earle Page, referred to 'the extraordinary kindness and capacity' (H.R. Deb. 17.6.1937, 22) he had displayed as Clerk. The leader of the opposition, John Curtin, thought him 'a most assiduous and courteous officer' (H.R. Deb. 17.6.1937, 22). The Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Empire Parliaments, of which Parkes had become a foundation member in 1927, described him as an official held in 'the greatest esteem' for his 'ability' and 'quiet manner' (1936).

Parkes in retirement pursued his favoured recreation of lawn bowls. He was a 'staunch churchman' (*Canberra Times* 1950, 4), with a close interest in the Anglican Men's Movement, and well known throughout Canberra as a lay preacher. Predeceased by his second wife, he died on 20 April 1941 at Canberra and was interred privately at the Canberra cemetery. He was survived by two stepchildren and two sons of his first marriage, the youngest of whom, Norman James Parkes, would also become Clerk of the House of Representatives (1971–76). His eldest son, William Ernest, worked as a gardener at Parliament House for many years. In December 1950, a memorial tablet was unveiled at St John's Church, Reid, honouring his service to the city.

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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.2023.48