

Parkes, Norman James: Clerk 1971–1976

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Norman James Parkes (1912–91), ninth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 29 July 1912 at North Carlton, Melbourne, youngest of two sons of Melbourne-born Ernest William Parkes, fifth Clerk of the House of Representatives (1927–37), and his first wife, Susannah Ellen, née Hall, from Yarrambat, Victoria. After attending state schools, in March 1936 Norman joined the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff in the Commonwealth parliament as a clerk and typist. In June 1937, he transferred to the Department of the House of Representatives as Accounts Clerk and Reading Clerk. Department numbers were small and the principle of promotion by seniority was sacrosanct; Parkes would later observe wryly that it was only his father's retirement from the top job as Clerk that enabled him to apply for a position at the bottom. On 22 May 1937 at St Hilary's Church of England, Kew, Melbourne, he married Maida Cleave Silk of Tumbarumba, New South Wales.

Parkes was promoted to the post of Clerk of the Papers and Accountant in January 1939. During World War II, he served part-time as a private in the 21st Battalion Volunteer Defence Corps. In January 1946, he was appointed Clerk of the Records and Assistant Clerk of Committees—a position he held until his promotion to Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees in December 1949. As Serjeant-at-Arms, he carried the mace while escorting Queen Elizabeth II between the House of Representatives and the Senate chamber when she opened the third session of the twentieth parliament on 15 February 1954—the first such opening by a reigning sovereign in Australian history. His father had performed the same function at the opening of the provisional Parliament House in Canberra on 9 May 1927 by the Queen's father, the Duke of York, later King George VI. Parkes was promoted to Third Clerk Assistant (July 1954), Second Clerk Assistant (June 1955), and Clerk Assistant (January 1959, redesignated Deputy Clerk in 1964).

January 1968 saw the first Conference of Australian Presiding Officers and Clerks-at-the-Table, organised by the Commonwealth parliament and held in Canberra, with attendance by the presiding officers and Clerks of the six state parliaments and

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Figure 51: Norman Parkes.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

the Territorial legislatures of the Northern Territory and of Papua and New Guinea. Parkes wrote that the Clerks 'had a field day' (1968, 146) discussing instructions to a committee of the whole House.

In February 1971, the future Labor Party leader W. G. (Bill) Hayden, in calling for the abolition of imperial honours, nonetheless identified two officers of the House who deserved knighthoods for their service to Australia: the Clerk of the House, (Sir) Alan Turner, and his deputy, Parkes. Parkes was never knighted, but he did succeed Turner as Clerk of the House on 11 December 1971. As Clerk, he served as Honorary Secretary of the Commonwealth of Australia Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. He was also a member of the steering committee for the first, second, and third Australasian Parliamentary Seminars—a significant Commonwealth of Australia Branch initiative undertaken in South-East Asia.

Parkes's tenure as Clerk was marked by three events unique in House of Representatives history. In August 1974, the Senate and the House of Representatives sat jointly for the first time since Federation. Two months earlier, six bills previously rejected by the Senate that had been triggers for the double-dissolution election of 18 May 1974 were again passed by the House of Representatives but rejected in the Senate. The necessary constitutional conditions having thus been satisfied, the governor-general, on the government's advice, convened a joint sitting scheduled to commence in the House of Representatives on 6 August 1974. Parkes and his counterpart from the Senate, J. R. Odgers, worked closely with the Speaker, James Cope, in working out the necessary procedures. Just days before the scheduled sitting, its validity was challenged unsuccessfully before the High Court by the President of the Senate, Sir Magnus Cormack, and Senator James Webster. Among those who received writs of summons to appear before the court were the Speaker and Parkes. In the event, neither attended and the challenge was dismissed. All six proposed laws were subsequently passed by an absolute majority of senators and members.

The second event was the sudden resignation of the Speaker. On 27 February 1975, most government members, including the prime minister, declined to support Cope after he named the minister for labour and immigration, Clyde Cameron. Cope saw this as a vote of no confidence and it led to his immediately announcing his intention to tender his resignation to the governor-general. It was left to Parkes to formally announce to the House later that day that the administrator, standing in for the absent governor-general, had accepted Cope's resignation, and then to preside over the vote that led to Gordon Scholes becoming the new Speaker.

The third event occurred on 11 November 1975 following the governor-general's dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his ministry and the appointment of a caretaker government under the leadership of the former opposition leader Malcolm Fraser. Scholes, with support from Parkes, presided over the tumultuous session that followed, during which the Fraser caretaker government did not have a

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majority on the floor of the House and was defeated on several procedural motions and a resolution of want of confidence in the prime minister. Later that day, the Clerk stood immediately behind Whitlam as the former prime minister spoke from the steps of the parliament building, followed by the formal announcement of the dissolution of parliament by the governor-general's official secretary, (Sir) David Smith. These three events, along with the Whitlam government's ambitious legislative program, made for, in the words of John (Jack) Pettifer, Parkes's successor, 'a time of great testing', with the Clerk's performance earning him 'trust, respect and admiration' (Pettifer 1991).

Appointed OBE in 1961 and CBE in 1976, Parkes retired as Clerk of the House on 31 December 1976. Not only was it unique in Commonwealth parliamentary history for a father and son to have served as Clerks of a house of the parliament but, as Prime Minister Fraser pointed out, few families had served the parliament and the people of Australia for so long—a total of seventy-five unbroken years. Whitlam, who had known Parkes for more than forty years, described him as 'a man of experience, distinction and honour' (H.R. Deb. 9.12.1976, 3580).

Along with Pettifer, Parkes in retirement supported the demolition of the old parliament building on aesthetic grounds. He had been an accomplished cricketer; a champion lawn bowler at club, district, and state levels; and a talented table tennis player who once played an exhibition match in Canberra's Albert Hall against the then world champion, Miklos Szabados. Parkes died on 29 January 1991 at Canberra; his wife and two sons survived him. The serving Clerk of the House, Alan Browning, observed that he would be remembered for his 'outstanding knowledge of parliamentary law, practice and procedure, for his warm and friendly personality and above all, for his humanity and humility' (*Canberra Times* 1991). Cope recalled the 'splendid advice, assistance and cooperation' (H.R. Deb. 12.2.1991, 315) he had received from Parkes and the enduring friendship that had developed between them. Pettifer called him 'a man who had in his make-up all the emotion and sentiment of a true "servant of the House"' (Pettifer 1991, 11).

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