

Pettifer, John Athol (Jack): Clerk 1977–1982

Stephen Holt

John Athol (Jack) Pettifer (1919–2014), tenth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born at North Fitzroy, Melbourne, on 16 July 1919, second child and only son of Thomas Joseph Pettifer, parliamentary messenger, and his wife, Annie, née Darroch. The family connection with the Commonwealth parliament dated back to its first sitting in Melbourne in 1901, when Tom started work there as a lift attendant. The family left Melbourne early in 1927 in the lead-up to the parliament's move to Canberra, and initially lived at Ainslie. They were present at the opening of the new parliament building on 9 May 1927. In 1930 Jack became boys' captain at Ainslie Primary School before going on to Telopea Park High School, where in 1931 his attendance overlapped with that of Gough Whitlam.

In 1933 Tom Pettifer was appointed housekeeper of Parliament House, and the family moved into a flat located on the Senate side of the building. Their son had a room to himself down the corridor and later recalled roller skating in the corridors, setting up a punching ball platform in the basement under the Senate chamber, and sunbaking on the roof. Ready access to the Parliament House tennis court sealed an enduring love of the sport.

At the age of fourteen, after completing the Intermediate Certificate, Pettifer left school to become a messenger in the Prime Minister's Department. On 19 April 1939, he joined the staff of the House of Representatives as an accounts and reading clerk—still living in the parliament building. He picked up typing skills at night classes and studied accountancy by correspondence, later graduating from Canberra University College (BCom, 1954).

In June 1941, Pettifer, already a reservist, enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force and participated in the Empire Air Training Scheme in Canada and the Bahamas. Graduating as a pilot officer in March 1942 and becoming a flight lieutenant in 1944, he served with 86 Squadron Royal Air Force based at Tain, Scotland, as a Coastal Command pilot flying Liberator bombers to hunt U-boats. Returning to

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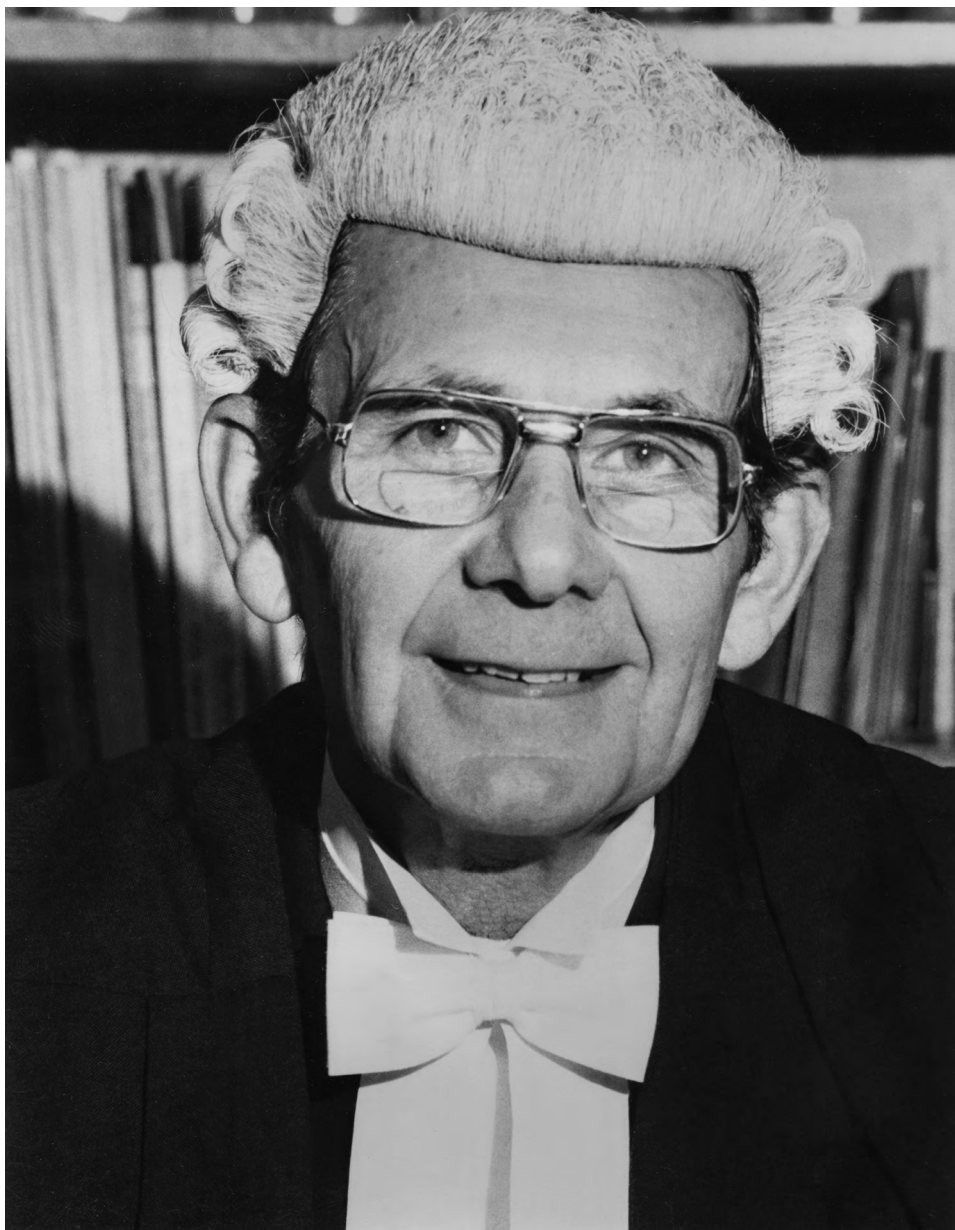


Figure 52: Jack Pettifer.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

Australia in October 1945, he was discharged in December and rejoined the staff of the House of Representatives. On 21 December 1946 at Canberra Baptist Church, he married Ruth Wilson, who he had met when she was a ground wireless operator at Tain. They at first lived at Narrabundah and then Red Hill, going on to have four daughters and a son.

Pettifer was promoted to Clerk of the Records and Assistant Clerk of Committees in January 1950. On 1 July that year, he became Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees. A year later he was involved in the historic privilege case involving Raymond Fitzpatrick and Frank Browne. Both men were alleged to have published a false report in the *Bankstown Observer* concerning the member for Reid, Charles Morgan, seriously breaching parliamentary privilege. As secretary to the Privileges Committee, Pettifer was responsible for documentation relating to the case, including the transcript of evidence. His role as custodian of such sensitive material inspired a newspaper article from the reporter Alan Reid depicting him as a latter-day Guy Fawkes. The confidential transcript that he was looking after was, apparently, ‘almost as lethal’ (Reid 1955, 4) as the explosives hidden in the Houses of Parliament in London in 1605.

As Serjeant-at-Arms, Pettifer was the public face of the House’s dignity during the case. On 10 June 1955, wearing knee britches, buckled shoes, and a jabot, and bearing the parliamentary mace over his right shoulder, he ushered Fitzpatrick and Browne into and out of the chamber as their penalty, a three-month jail sentence, was determined. On 18 July 1955, Pettifer accompanied the men when they were transferred by Commonwealth vehicle from Canberra police station to Goulburn gaol. The hour-long trip was unexpectedly relaxed, other than Pettifer noticing that Fitzpatrick had brought along an axe—his favoured means of keeping fit. Two days after Fitzpatrick and Browne’s sentence expired on 10 September, Pettifer was promoted to Third Clerk Assistant. His next promotions occurred in 1959, to Second Clerk Assistant, and in 1964 to Clerk Assistant. From 1966 to 1969, he was Secretary to the Joint Select Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House. This committee did much of the preliminary conceptual work for the eventual construction of the new building.

On 26 August 1971, the House had to adjourn because it lacked a quorum—the first time an adjournment had been triggered in this way in fifty-one years. The incident prompted a front-page article in the following morning’s *Daily Telegraph* by Reid, who asserted that the House had ‘ignominiously collapsed’ (1971, 1). He claimed that there was no quorum because some members had left the chamber after the quorum was called and that others did not come in when summoned. Reid was referred to the Privileges Committee for alleged contempt of the House by producing a false report of proceedings that reflected adversely on the presiding officer. The committee took evidence from witnesses including Pettifer, who was one of the

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Clerks officiating in the chamber at the time. He told the committee that he had no recollection of any member leaving any part of the chamber when the quorum was called. Under questioning, he indicated that his attention was focused on counting the members actually present in the chamber (NAA A12097, 8).

Pettifer's evidence encapsulated the difficulty the committee faced in determining the validity or otherwise of Reid's assertions. Committee members held a series of contested votes before deciding through the casting vote of the chairman, Nigel Drury, that the article constituted a contempt of the House and that an apology should be demanded. In the small hours of 9 December, the House voted on party lines to agree to the committee's findings but to not impose a penalty. That same month, Pettifer was promoted to Deputy Clerk.

In July 1973, Pettifer told the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Broadcast of Parliamentary Proceedings that the Australian Broadcasting Commission should televise parliament (but not parliamentary committees). Consideration of this innovation was overtaken during 1975 by the unprecedented crisis of the Senate's failure to pass the Whitlam government's supply bills. On the afternoon of 11 November, Pettifer was on duty as the drama reached its climax. When the House resumed after lunch, he was stunned by a whispered message from the Clerk of the House, Norman Parkes, that the governor-general, Sir John Kerr, had dismissed the Whitlam government and sworn in Malcolm Fraser as caretaker prime minister. For the next two and a half hours, Pettifer went about his professional duties in a highly charged atmosphere as motions of adjournment and lack of confidence were debated and voted on amid constant interjections. A year later, in the London-based journal of the Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Commonwealth Parliaments, Pettifer recalled these events as 'startling and dismaying' (Pettifer 1976, 29). He considered the need to amend Australia's Constitution to avoid another such crisis as 'urgent and vital' (Pettifer 1976, 36).

On 9 December 1976, Pettifer was selected as Clerk of the House of Representatives in succession to Parkes, effective from 1 January 1977. The appointment came at a fortunate time. During his entire period as Clerk, the Speaker was Sir Billy Snedden, who was keen to make the House less subservient to the executive. In April 1979, the Department of the House of Representatives issued its first annual report. Snedden also authorised Pettifer to prepare discussion papers on ways to reform the operations of parliament. The opening paper focused on developing a more effective committee system to improve the scrutiny of legislation and government operations by members of the House. Party discipline had 'overwhelmed the Westminster system' (Pettifer 1979, 2) and made imposition of the executive's policies on the House now largely a formality. It was time, he suggested, for the House of Representatives to emulate the Senate's system of permanent standing committees, beginning with the establishment of estimates committees and leading up to the creation of some eight standing

committees to cover the full range of government activity. A second discussion paper, in 1980, returned to the issue of televising parliament. He suggested that the success of this in Canada 'must cause very serious consideration to be given to the possibility of televising the proceedings of the House of Representatives' (Pettifer 1980, 26).

Pettifer had resolved, with Snedden's support, to make his own direct contribution to the better functioning of the House. The Senate had had its own definitive reference guide since 1953, *Australian Senate Practice*. To match this, Pettifer led a new Procedure Office within the Department of the House of Representatives that was charged with producing a publication comparable with Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice*, which was used in the United Kingdom. Information concerning rulings, matters of precedent, procedures, and historical data had long been kept on an array of loose cards, files, and other miscellaneous House records. Amid this work to impose order and clarify House practice, Pettifer was in 1980 appointed CBE. The following year, the inaugural edition of *House of Representatives Practice* appeared. It and successive editions provide an invaluable reference guide, detailing the evolution of the House since Federation.

On 6 May 1982, Snedden informed the House of the Clerk's impending retirement during the winter recess when he turned sixty-three. A resolution expressing the House's appreciation of Pettifer's long and meritorious service was carried unanimously. Prime Minister Fraser described him as 'a great servant of this House and, through it, of Australia' (H.R. Deb. 6.5.1982, 2343), while the leader of the opposition, Bill Hayden, noted that Pettifer was one of a long line of parliamentary officers 'unremittingly dedicated to making the democratic parliamentary institution work' (H.R. Deb. 6.5.1982, 2344).

The dismissal of the Whitlam government continued to occupy Pettifer. In an interview published immediately after his retirement, he repeated his view that the events of 1975 highlighted the need for a constitutional amendment to address the Senate's ability to reject appropriation and supply bills passed by the House (Mannix 15 July 1982, 7). His previous involvement with privileges cases also concerned him. A month after retiring, he appeared before the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Privilege. His submission, which he characterised as 'a bit heretical' (Mannix 4 August 1982, 9), contended that power to punish anyone who breached parliamentary privilege should be ceded to the courts.

Despite his personal connection stretching back to 1927, Pettifer in retirement was not sentimental about the existing parliament building. He publicly endorsed the view that it should be demolished after members moved to their new site on Capital Hill. Retention was expensive and the old parliament would be 'a horrible blot in the path of the beautiful sweep of the land axis' (Pettifer 1983, 18) that Walter Burley Griffin intended. An active Christian, Pettifer served as treasurer and a deacon at the

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Canberra Baptist Church for twenty-four years until 1994. In 2001 he was awarded a Centenary Medal for his work on *House of Representatives Practice*. Predeceased by his wife in 1985, he remained in his own home until his death on 20 January 2014.

Pettifer was smallish in stature, utterly discreet, and known for his humility. Amid the hurly-burly of parliamentary life, the clarity and depth of his knowledge of the lore and customs of the House meant there was never any question of his being discounted or becoming flustered. Patience and consideration for others characterised his personal life as well as prevailing throughout his professional career.

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