

Poynton, Alexander (Alec): Chairman of Committees 1910–1913

John Hawkins and Rob Van Den Hoorn

Alexander Poynton (1853–1935), trade unionist, stock and station agent, and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 8 August 1853 at Castlemaine, Victoria, eldest son of the fourteen children of Alexander Poynton, a miner and farmer from Liverpool, England, and his Irish wife, Rosanna, née McFadden. Alec's father took some part in the Eureka rebellion at Ballarat, one of his brothers served as lord mayor of Perth (1934–37), and a nephew, Sir Alexander George Wales, was lord mayor of Melbourne (1934–37). His formal education ended at the age of fourteen when his father was crippled in a mining accident. On 15 July 1880, he married seventeen-year-old Harriet Brown at the Free Church of England, Ballarat, with whom he was to have eight children.

Poynton's youthful experience of working on his father's farm but then making way for some of his brothers fostered a lasting interest in issues of land availability. Subsequently working as a miner, shearer, and station hand, his involvement in labour disputes helped to also implant a strong commitment to unionism. He became president of the Creswick branch of the Amalgamated Miners' Association, and in 1887 moved to Port Augusta, South Australia, as a union organiser, serving as branch secretary and treasurer of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union, and as treasurer of the Australian Workers' Union (1887–94). In 1890 he stood unsuccessfully for the South Australian House of Assembly seat of Newcastle. Three years later, campaigning on local issues such as irrigation, a land tax that exempted farmers, the extension of pastoral settlement, and a poll tax on camels, he won the adjoining state seat of Flinders as an independent Labor candidate. Although an independent, he attended caucus meetings of the United Labor Party but was not bound by its decisions. While an early supporter of Premier Charles Kingston, he was one of four members who, in November 1899, crossed the floor to bring down the Kingston government, citing the premier's overbearing nature and tardiness in implementing land reforms—an act

'ORDER, ORDER!'

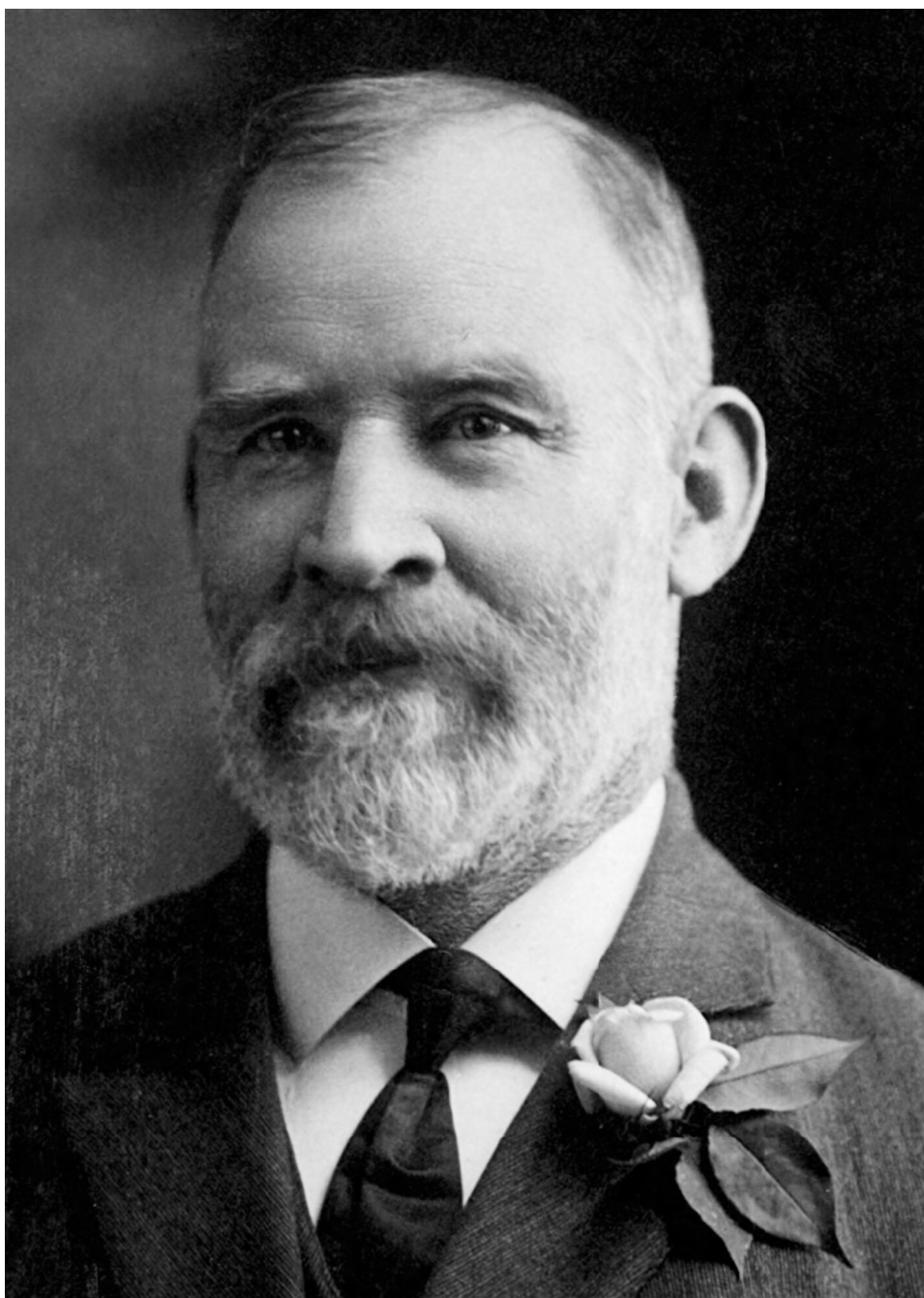


Figure 53: Alec Poynton.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC/6459/26 LOC B21, T. Humphrey & Co. Melbourne.

for which he was expelled from the Australian Workers' Union. Poynton then became commissioner for Crown lands under Premier Vaiben Solomon, but this government lasted just eight days.

In 1901 Poynton stood for the conservative Australasian National League in the first election for the House of Representatives. He won the seventh and last place in the multi-member electorate that covered all of South Australia, aided by support from both free-traders and elements of the labour movement. In 1903 he was unopposed for the new single-member electorate of Grey, which he held at the next six elections, being unopposed again in 1906 and 1910. Grey was reputedly the largest electorate in the world, as, until 1911, it covered not only more than 90 per cent of South Australia but also the entire Northern Territory, which was then under South Australian control. Poynton did not formally join the Labor Party until May 1904. In 1909 he chaired a royal commission on stripper harvesters, which endorsed Justice H. B. Higgins's famous Conciliation and Arbitration Court judgement of two years earlier that set a minimum award wage for unskilled workers.

During his early years in the federal parliament, Poynton became 'a favourite with all parties in the House' (*Punch* 1910, 6). Although habitually mild-mannered, he could on occasion flare into anger, such as over Speakers' rulings he thought unfair. In his first term, he came close to being suspended from the chamber when he was named by the Chairman of Committees, John Chanter, for initially refusing to withdraw his description of a government amendment concerning reimbursement for the governor-general as a 'wretched subterfuge' and 'a dirty job' (H.R. Deb. 1.5.1902, 12234). Poynton was in June 1909 nominated by Speaker Sir Frederick Holder as one of four Temporary Chairmen of Committees. In December that year, Poynton raised in the House his concerns about how the Senate might alter the Northern Territory Acceptance Bill, which provided for the Commonwealth to take over responsibility for the Northern Territory. The Speaker, Carty Salmon, cautioned Poynton that 'under our Standing Orders it is incompetent for an honourable member to allude to any measures pending in another place' (H.R. Deb. 4.12.1909, 6980). Poynton was not deterred, with the result that three days later Senator John Neild of New South Wales appealed to the President of the Senate about 'utterly unparliamentary and unconstitutional events in another place' (S. Deb. 6.12.1909, 7017), with little result.

Poynton became Chairman of Committees following the election in April 1910 of Andrew Fisher's second government. Despite heading the first Labor government to hold a secure majority in the national parliament, Fisher consulted the leader of the opposition, Alfred Deakin, about Poynton's nomination. Poynton's standing among his parliamentary peers was such that he was appointed without a vote in the House, occupying the position from 1 July 1910 until the dissolution of the parliament on 23 April 1913. His performance as Chairman was largely smooth, even if the Melbourne *Punch* thought him 'a little too peaceful' as 'he allows too much

'ORDER, ORDER!'

liberty in committee' (1910, 6). He was nonetheless prepared to direct his own prime minister during a debate on Commonwealth–state financial relations to 'confine his remarks strictly to the amendment before the Chair' (H.R. Deb. 20.7.1910, 553). The Fisher government's ambitious legislative agenda made this a stressful time to be presiding over the House. When it began sitting for more than twelve hours each day, Speaker Charles McDonald called on Poynton to take his place for two to three hours daily, 'as long as the present hours of sitting are observed' (H.R. Deb. 9.9.1910, 2924).

In March 1911, Poynton embarked on an overseas tour that took him to Canada, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom, including attendance with Fisher and other Australian parliamentarians at the coronation of King George V. He claimed to have undertaken this trip for the benefit of his health but was a keen observer throughout of local social conditions. His letters to his wife, published the following year, are enlivened by the outrage an old union organiser felt whenever he espied substandard working conditions. In Britain, he concluded that 'the weakness in the United Kingdom is the indifference with which the average Englishman values humanity in East London and other sweated parts of the Kingdom' (Poynton 1912, 58).

The only serious challenge to Poynton as Chairman of Committees occurred in November 1912 when the member for Wentworth, William Kelly, felt that his time for speaking had been cut short by calls for a quorum and objected to Poynton's ruling that this was consistent with standing orders. The debate that followed rambled through the night and was itself interrupted by calls from exhausted members for a quorum before the House finally upheld the ruling. In December 1912, McDonald's illness led to Poynton presiding as Acting Speaker on 20–21 December 1912, the last sitting days of the fourth parliament.

The Fisher government was narrowly defeated at the May 1913 election, and Poynton was replaced as Chairman of Committees with James Fowler. On the backbench, Poynton was generally a sober contributor to debate, but allowed himself the occasional flippancy—notably, an interjection that a member's comparison of Prime Minister Joseph Cook to a porcupine was 'an insult to the porcupine' (H.R. Deb. 11.11.1913, 3025). He was not reappointed as Chairman when Labor returned to office following the September 1914 election—the post instead returning to John Chanter. Poynton strongly supported the stance Prime Minister William Morris Hughes took during World War I supporting conscription, despite the death of one of his sons in the South African War and another in the current war. When the Labor Party split over the issue in November 1916, he joined Hughes's minority National Labor government, serving as treasurer. His main concern during his brief tenure in this senior position was the increasing difficulty of raising large war loans, which attracted little attention from a public and press more interested in the war's

progress and negotiations to form a more viable national government. Once the National Labor and Liberal parties merged in February 1917 to form the Nationalist Party, the treasurer's job reverted to the veteran former treasurer Sir John Forrest. While Poynton was not treasurer for long enough to bring down his own budget, in December 1916 he presented to parliament a comprehensive statement on the government's financial position.

In January 1918, Hughes fulfilled a promise by tendering his resignation as prime minister after the defeat of the second plebiscite on conscription. Poynton was among the senior parliamentarians sounded out by Governor-General Sir Roland Munro Ferguson as a possible replacement, only for Hughes to stay on. Poynton instead became an able and well-prepared minister in a wide range of portfolios: acting minister for the navy (1918–19), honorary minister (1918–20), assistant minister for repatriation (1919), minister for home and territories (1920–21), and postmaster-general (1921–23). He also delivered the 1919 budget on behalf of the ill and exhausted treasurer, William Watt, a future Speaker. In 1920, he was appointed OBE.

After losing his seat at the 1922 election to Labor's Andrew Lacey, Poynton withdrew from public life. For many years, both before and after politics, he was a partner in the stock and station agency Poynton and Claxton. A third son, Alexander junior, died aged forty-seven in 1929. Stocky and red-cheeked, this widely respected parliamentarian died at Toorak Gardens, Adelaide, on 9 January 1935 and was buried at the North Road cemetery in Nailsworth, survived by his wife and their five remaining children.

This article supplements the original Volume 11 ADB biography, published 1988, authored by Rob Van Den Hoorn. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/poynton-alexander-alec-8093/text14125

Select bibliography

Advertiser (Adelaide). 'Death of Mr A. Poynton'. 10 January 1935, 9

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 1 May 1902, 12,234

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 4 December 1909, 6980–87

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 1 July 1910, 36

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 20 July 1910, 553

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 September 1910, 2924

Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 11 November 1913, 3025

Australia. Senate. *Parliamentary Debates*, 6 December 1909, 7017–18

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Broadhead, H. S. 'The Australian Federal Labor Party 1900–1905'. MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1959

Hawkins, John. 'Alexander Poynton: The Caretaker'. *Economic Roundup* (Department of the Treasury), no. 4 (2008): 125–29

Observer (Adelaide). 'Alexander Poynton'. 13 January 1923, 42

Poynton, Alexander. *My Travels Around the World: Letters to My Wife*. Adelaide: Co-operative Printing and Publishing Company of South Australia, 1912

Punch (Melbourne). 'People We Know'. 11 August 1910, 6

Stockley, David. 'The Federal Parliamentary Labor Party 1904–1913: Its Socio-economic Theory and Practice in its Formative Years'. PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1976

Weller, Patrick, ed. *Caucus Minutes 1901–1949: Minutes of the Meetings of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*. Vol. 1, 1901–1917. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1975. doi.org/10.2307/27508242

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.2023.51