

Prowse, John Henry (Jack): Chairman of Committees 1934–1943

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John Henry Prowse (1871–1944), insurance agent, farmer, mayor, and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 16 June 1871 at Adelong, New South Wales, fifth of fourteen children of English-born James Prowse, miner and farmer, and his Irish-born wife, Mary Ann, née Wylie. Jack was educated at Adelong Public School and King's College, Melbourne. On 6 April 1896, he married Victorian-born Edith Jane McNeilance at Clifton Hill, Melbourne; they had two sons and four daughters.

For twenty-five years, Prowse worked with United Insurance Co., managing the Townsville branch from 1889 until he moved to Western Australia as state manager in 1903. Energetic and enterprising, he was soon 'counted as a decisive acquisition to the business life of the community' ('Truthful Thomas' 1905, 25). He served as mayor of Subiaco (1904–05) and of Perth (1913–14), and was re-elected unopposed in 1914. In keeping with his support for the Greater Perth movement to establish metropolitan-wide local governance, during his mayoralty the municipalities of Perth, North Perth, and Leederville merged to form the City of Perth. Insisting that 'clean citizenship came before clean roads' (*Daily News* 1914, 6), he proved an uncontroversial and competent administrator. Even *Truth* newspaper—not a natural sympathiser—acknowledged the diligence of Perth's 'first bloke':

I'm down on all loquacit-ee
With verbiage I don't agree
For biz is biz I say
And Perth its ways must pay
In work I do delight,
I'm busy day and night. (*Truth* 1914, 1)

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 54: Jack Prowse.

Source: *Truth* newspaper collection of photographs, 10028B, State Library of Western Australia, 047927PD.

Prowse was also busy in the early organisation of philanthropic causes in Perth, including the Blind and Deaf and Dumb Institutions, and the Children's Protection Society. He was a grand master of the Grand Orange Lodge, president of the West Australian Temperance Alliance (1905–11), a supporter of local option for liquor licences, and a lay preacher of the Wesleyan Church. An imposing figure, well over six feet (183 cm) tall, he regularly attended church services wearing, regardless of temperature, 'a full suit of black and a silk hat' ('Truthful Thomas' 1905, 25). His interests turned from urban to rural when he and his brother Albert ('Ab') bought Wallatin station north of Doodlakine in the Wheatbelt region in 1910. Sited on salmon gum and gimlet flats, it proved to be a productive wheat farm to which Ab successfully added stud stock. Although the partnership continued until 1940, in 1929 Jack purchased another farm, at Bangadang on the Preston River in the state's south-west near Donnybrook, as his principal residence and sheep stud.

In 1913 Prowse became an executive member of the new Farmers' and Settlers' Association (FSA), and the following year was a foundation director of the rural trading cooperative Westralian Farmers Ltd, which later became Wesfarmers. His administrative experience led to appointment as the first chairman of the Discharged Soldiers' Land Settlement Board, assessing the qualifications of applicants under the terms of the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act. Authorised by the FSA as a Country Party candidate and helped by recently introduced preferential voting, in 1919 Prowse won the federal seat of Swan, which Labor had won the previous year at a by-election following the death of Sir John Forrest. Prowse insisted at the declaration of the poll that 'the producers of Australia are justly entitled to be heard in the Halls of the Legislature' (*Daily News* 1920). He became an original core member of the Federal Parliamentary Country Party formed in 1920. In August 1922, he roused the vitriol of Prime Minister William Morris Hughes when he joined William Montgomerie Fleming in questioning the propriety of government sugar purchases that Hughes had approved. This clash ended Fleming's parliamentary career at the election of December 1922, but Prowse convincingly won the new division of Forrest and proceeded to hold it on seven occasions—twice unopposed.

Responding to negotiations for a coalition with the Nationalists, Prowse urged the removal of Hughes as prime minister and advocated tariff reductions for primary producers as major conditions for cooperation. He was appointed government whip in the Bruce–Page government that took office in February 1923. The other positions he held early in his long parliamentary career reflected his reputation as a conscientious committee member and capable chairman. He became a member of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts (1920–23, 1925–29), and made clear his determination to serve without fear or favour. His questioning of the impact of the Navigation Act on Australian coastal trade, particularly on outlying states, resulted in his chairing a 1923 select committee and subsequent royal commission on the operation of the Act (H.R. Deb. 12.7.1923, 1045–48).

Prowse also opposed the 1924 Bruce–Page electoral pact, particularly the immunity clause relating to the non-contesting of seats between the two main non-Labor parties. He preferred an arrangement based on 'the silken threads of friendship' to 'tying the Parties up with a hawser' (*Argus* 1924, 9), and resigned as whip in August. This action possibly cost him a place in the ministry left vacant by P. G. Stewart's resignation over the same issue. In opposing the immunity clause and arguing for revenue tariffs rather than protection of industry, Prowse matched the views of his state party. In October 1927, he was appointed as a Temporary Chairman of Committees and, on 23 October 1934, was elected as Chairman—the outcome of a deal between the United Australia Party (UAP) and the Country Party, which days later, under the leadership of Joseph Lyons and (Sir) Earle Page, re-established a conservative coalition government. Prowse's appointment aroused strident opposition from Lang Labor members, who suspected that he was being sidelined as part of a deal with the UAP over tariff policy.

The lingering bitterness of some Labor and Lang Labor members following the split of 1931 and the defection of Lyons made these few years turbulent ones for presiding officers. Just over a year after his appointment, Prowse was the subject of a motion moved by the new leader of the opposition, John Curtin, that he was 'unfit for office' because of 'gross partiality' (H.R. Deb. 27.11.1935, 1927). Curtin alleged that government members were allowed considerable latitude while Prowse's 'argus-eyed capacity to see, and an uncanny ability to hear' (H.R. Deb. 27.11.1935, 1930) were directed at the opposition benches. Lang Labor leader Jack Beasley seconded the motion. Far from confirming press speculation that he would resign, Prowse, who had the benefit of prior warning, responded with a detailed rebuttal, replete with data demonstrating his even-handedness in the calls he had given to members of the various parties to speak in the House. The motion was lost on party lines.

Despite this difficult beginning, opposition anger with Prowse eased, and he was unanimously re-elected Chairman in November 1937. Six months later, UAP members were the ones criticising him, for not voting in support of the government's National Health and Pensions Insurance Bill. He responded that his acceptance of the position of Chairman of Committees did not impose any restrictions on his voting and that his first obligation was to his rural constituents. After a series of stormy sittings, he later conceded that in the chair he had been 'a little too strict' and so aimed for 'a feeling of mutual understanding' and 'not to adhere too precisely to the rules laid down by the Standing Orders' (H.R. Deb. 22.8.1940, 574). Curtin was now prepared to compliment him on his willingness to listen and an ability 'to get bills through the committee stage expeditiously' (H.R. Deb. 22.8.1940, 572).

Both Prowse and Speaker Walter Nairn continued in their positions as presiding officers following the change of government in October 1941, with Prowse explaining that it was a time 'to forget party and fight with a united front' (*Daily News* 1941, 7).

The minority Curtin government relied on them to use their casting votes judiciously and so they helped to provide political stability during a period of national crisis. But both resigned in June 1943 to support an opposition no-confidence motion against the government. Labor's landslide win in the national election two months later ended both men's parliamentary careers. Prowse suffered a swing against him in Forrest of more than 20 per cent.

Retiring to Bangadang, Prowse keenly felt his narrow failure to attain twenty-five years in parliament despite being seventy-two years of age. Nevertheless, he had reason to be pleased with his parliamentary career. Although it was sometimes suggested that he was unlucky not to have attained a ministry—a failure ascribed locally to his continued vocal opposition to protective tariffs—he did achieve recognition in positions that matched his skills as a chairman. Even (Sir) Robert Menzies, with whom the Country Party had difficult relations in these years, appreciated that he was a 'very assiduous member' (H.R. Deb. 17.7.1944, 29).

On 20 May 1944, Prowse died at Donnybrook. He was buried in Karrakatta cemetery, Perth. His first wife had predeceased him on 29 April 1939, but he was survived by his second wife, Tasmanian-born Jean Germaine, née Murdoch, whom he had married at Toorak Presbyterian Church, Melbourne, on 5 April 1941, with Harold Holt in attendance as best man. In a parliamentary tribute, Prime Minister Curtin captured Prowse's essential attributes: 'a most thorough, efficient and business-like manner', 'quick perception and understanding', and, above all, a 'conscientious conception of the duty that he owed to those who elected him to this chamber' (H.R. Deb. 17.7.1944, 28–29).

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