

# **Riordan, William James (Bill): Chairman of Committees 1943–1946**

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William James Frederick Riordan (1908–1973), Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 8 February 1908 at Chillagoe, Queensland, son of William James Riordan, engine driver, and his wife, Annie Helen, née Page, both Queensland born. Educated at state schools at Chillagoe, Mareeba, and Gordonvale, and at Brisbane Grammar School, young Bill worked in the Department of Justice in Brisbane for seven years before becoming secretary to his father, a former trade union official who was appointed to the Industrial Court of Queensland in 1933.

Growing up in a family with a trade union and political background (his father was a member of the Legislative Council in 1917–22, and his uncle Ernest was to enter the Legislative Assembly in 1936), Riordan became interested in politics at an early age and joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP). On the death of another uncle, David ('Darby') Riordan, in 1936, he interrupted his legal studies at the University of Queensland and won Darby's federal seat of Kennedy at a by-election on 12 December. At the age of twenty-eight, he was the youngest member of the House of Representatives. He was admitted to the Queensland Bar on 22 April 1941, but never practised. On 19 December 1942, at St Mary's Catholic Cathedral, Sydney, he married Kathleen Amelda Garvey (d. 1970), an interior decorator; they were to remain childless.

The electorate of Kennedy covered much of Central and North Queensland. Representing his constituents in this vast area, Riordan faced a daunting task—communications were poor, the roads being mostly gravel or worse, and telephone services proved unreliable—but he received valuable support from the powerful Australian Workers' Union. In the late 1930s, he was concerned about the vulnerability of northern Australia to potentially hostile forces and, from the opposition backbenches, urged the government to take measures to bolster defence.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



**Figure 55: Bill Riordan.**

Source: *Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook* Tenth Issue, 1945.

Labor gained office under John Curtin in October 1941. Riordan was elected Chairman of Committees on 22 June 1943 in the wake of the unexpected resignations of Walter Nairn as Speaker and John Prowse as Chairman of Committees when the opposition parties, of which they were members, gave notice of an impending motion of no confidence in the Curtin government. Riordan made good use of his remarkable voice, which contemporaries noted ‘thunders and reverberates all over the building’ (*Cloncurry Advocate* 1943, 1). He presided over some difficult sessions during the later stages of World War II when the House debated legislation to implement the government’s postwar program. A future Speaker, Archie Cameron, responded to being suspended after being named by Riordan by describing him as ‘rude, uncouth, unfair and incompetent’ and said he feared ‘that the clerk’s eardrums will be pierced by his cries of order’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1945, 5). When this comment was raised in parliament, Cameron reluctantly agreed to withdraw—‘something which I have never done before in the whole of my parliamentary career’ (H.R. Deb. 8.5.1945, 1317).

In September 1945 the opposition leader, (Sir) Robert Menzies, moved a no-confidence motion against Riordan as Chairman of Committees, complaining that he ‘has developed a practice of delivering ... very hasty rulings, frequently thereafter refusing to honorable members the right to discuss them or to submit arguments in relation to them’. He also objected to what he saw as Riordan’s ‘very abrupt treatment of honorable members, calling them to order and sometimes bringing about disciplinary measures against them in a precipitate manner’ (H.R. Deb. 18.9.1945, 5493). Menzies had particularly in mind an incident of a few days earlier when Larry Anthony, the Country Party member for Richmond, was named and suspended during the budget debate; yet he recognised Riordan’s personal popularity by adding that ‘the honorable member, in his personal capacity, enjoys the goodwill of honorable members, including myself’ (H.R. Deb. 18.9.1945, 5493). During the debate that followed, Riordan’s main defender was a former Speaker, Norman Makin, who assured members that ‘my patience would not have been equal to that of the Chairman of Committees, who is to be commended for his admirable restraint’ (H.R. Deb. 18.9.1945, 5499). The motion was defeated along party lines.

Following the election of September 1946, Riordan was appointed minister for the navy in the second Chifley government, and held the portfolio until Labor’s defeat at the general election of December 1949. Since postwar defence policy had been broadly settled, his roles as minister were to run his department and implement the re-equipment program, which included the introduction of a fleet air arm. Although he knew little about naval matters, he carefully read the papers submitted to him, effectively represented the navy in cabinet, and made himself available to politicians of all parties who sought his assistance.

'ORDER, ORDER!'

Riordan adhered firmly to ALP principles and embraced the socialisation objective the party had adopted in 1921. A member (1941–42) of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Broadcasting, he had endorsed the minority Labor report that recommended the nationalisation of commercial radio stations. He backed the government's proposal to regulate the marketing of primary products: in 1946 he spoke approvingly of the sugar industry, in which prices and charges for milling and refining were fixed by the government, and workers' wages were determined by arbitration. Legislation introduced in 1947 to nationalise the private banks also received his support.

An electoral redistribution in 1948 led to Riordan's electorate being halved in size, but it still covered much of Central Queensland. He was able to retain his predominantly rural seat by developing and maintaining strong personal ties with working-class families in the sugar, mining, and meat industries, and in the railways. During parliamentary recesses, he travelled constantly throughout his electorate, but the strain taxed his health. He retired from parliament in 1966 on medical advice. In the ensuing by-election, the Country Party won Kennedy.

A tall, well-built man, Riordan liked people and was unfailingly courteous to them. Due to his impaired hearing, he sometimes used his impressive voice even more loudly in public than he intended. For recreation he played golf. In 1967 he was appointed CBE. He died of pneumonia on 15 January 1973 in Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, and was buried in Nudgee cemetery.

*This article supplements the original Volume 16 ADB biography, published 2002, authored by A. N. Preston. [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/riordan-william-james-bill-11530/text20569](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/riordan-william-james-bill-11530/text20569)*

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