

Tregear, Albert Allan: Clerk 1955–1958

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Albert Allan Tregear (1896–1976), seventh Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born in Port Melbourne on 15 May 1896, second son of Annie Tregear, née Cameron, and her husband, Gregory Albert Ernest Tregear, both Victorian born. Allan's father was a fireman and later a railway employee, but when a union dispute left him out of work for a number of years, Allan and his older brother William left school to become post office messenger boys in 1911.

In April 1912, Tregear was appointed a messenger in the Commonwealth Public Service and, in March 1913, he was promoted to the Public Service Commissioner's Office. Studying by night, he learnt shorthand and gained accountancy qualifications, and also commenced studies in commerce at the University of Melbourne. He transferred to the clerical division of the public service in May 1914, still in the Public Service Commissioner's Office. In September 1920, he switched to the Department of the Senate as a clerk and shorthand writer, filling a position vacated by John Ernest Edwards, a future Clerk of the Senate.

Tregear was promoted to the Department of the House of Representatives in March 1925, as Clerk of the Papers and Reading Clerk. The parliamentary service was by then preparing to move to Canberra, and in 1926 he accompanied the Speaker, Sir Littleton Groom, to examine the new Parliament House under construction. Tregear returned to Canberra in the immediate lead-up to the ceremonial opening on 9 May 1927, sleeping on a 'bed-settee' in the building. He was displeased to discover some design shortcomings, including staff offices so far from the House chamber that 'you had to run up and down stairs if you wanted a paper' (Tregear 1976, 15). Following the sudden death of the Clerk of the House, Walter Gale, he was appointed Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees, on 1 September 1927. He moved permanently to Canberra for the first full session in the new House, held on 28 September. His home for the next nine years was Brassey House, a hostel for unmarried government employees that was within walking distance of the parliament.

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 64: Allan Tregear.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

Unlike many others who transferred to Canberra, Tregear was not beset by homesickness and boredom. A keen sportsman, he was elected an officer of the Parliamentary Sports Association, was an A-grade wicketkeeper successively for the Ainslie, Manuka, and Forrest cricket clubs, and played competition tennis and golf. He also took an interest in horseracing, having in Melbourne lived next door to a trainer for whom he and his brother did track work. Additionally, he found himself in demand as an auditor or treasurer of sporting and cultural associations. At Brassey House, he helped to organise dances and was active in the fledgling Society of Arts and Literature.

Initially, Tregear had progressed steadily through the Department of the House of Representatives hierarchy. Following the death of Gale's successor as Clerk, John McGregor, Tregear became Second Clerk Assistant, on 10 November 1927. His elevation to a clerk at the table was so sudden that for his first session in the House he had to borrow a wig that happened to be much too large for him; the journalist Brian Penton was amused that this 'very father of all wigs' seemed to transform a 'pleasantly friendly young man' into 'a most ferocious martinet of the restoration' (Penton 1927, 14).

Early in Tregear's career, arrangements for royal commissions differed considerably from those used in later years, and so in 1928 he served as secretary to the royal commission on the moving picture industry with serving federal parliamentarians as the commissioners. He followed up the commission's report during a private visit to the United States in 1930, where he examined the operations of Hollywood studios. Back home, he completed his studies at Canberra University College (BCom, 1934). He was also a keen amateur actor, with his October 1935 performance in a reading of *Pygmalion* and *Galatea* deemed 'outstanding' (*Canberra Times* 1935, 2).

In March 1937, Tregear was promoted to Clerk Assistant—effectively deputy to the Clerk, Frank Green—and remained in this position for more than eighteen years. On 10 April 1937, he married Doris Addie Belford Moore of Ivanhoe, Victoria, at Wesley Church, Melbourne. A daughter of Charles Belford Moore, partner and director in the Moore Pizzey leather goods company, Doris was a champion golfer who became prominent in Canberra golfing and tennis associations. The 'culturally adventurous' (Freeman 2015, 9) Tregears had a family home built on a large block at the corner of Arthur Circle and Moresby Street, Red Hill, an enclave of senior public servants and academics. Designed by Malcolm Johnson Moir, it became known locally as 'Fort Tregear' because of its distinctive cubist mass. In 1940, following a request by the Secretary of the Department of Defence, (Sir) Frederick Sheddon, for the services of an officer with knowledge of parliament, Tregear moved to Melbourne to work at the Department of Munitions under Essington Lewis. That same year, a daughter, Gail Annette, was born. Tregear also spent a period as Secretary of the Joint House Department, while continuing as Clerk Assistant, between December 1942 and August 1944.

From October 1951, Tregear worked for a year in the Table Office of the House of Commons, making him the first Commonwealth parliamentary officer seconded to the British parliament. His report on this experience was published as a parliamentary paper in 1953, providing a systematic analysis of Westminster procedures that included tables comparing House of Representatives and House of Commons practice. He thus became something of an authority on parliamentary reform, and his report was frequently cited. Opposition leader H. V. Evatt quoted him in arguing for the more expeditious production of a daily *Hansard*, and backbenchers Alan Bird and W. C. Wentworth used his report to press for the establishment of House standing committees to consider legislation. Tregear himself told the Public Accounts Committee in 1953 that, compared with House of Commons practice, Australian parliamentarians had insufficient time to consider estimates during budget sessions. As late as 1974, his figures on the number of questions asked in one year in the House of Commons were used by the former Liberal minister (Sir) David Fairbairn to call for the reform of question time.

Tregear was promoted to Clerk of the House of Representatives on 27 June 1955, following Green's retirement. This was soon after the imprisonment by a vote of the House of Raymond Fitzpatrick and Frank Browne for a serious breach of parliamentary privilege, arising from their publication of a newspaper report accusing the member for Reid, Charles Morgan, of involvement in an immigration racket. Tregear, like Green, deplored this as a victory of executive government over parliamentary democracy. On 29 August 1956, he announced in the House the death of the Speaker, Archie Cameron, and took the chair in conducting the election of the next Speaker, (Sir) John McLeay. As Clerk, he became secretary of the Australian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Impeccably dressed and so scrupulously non-political that he habitually voted informal at general elections (Tregear 2014), Tregear sat at the table in the House of Representatives during sessions characterised by austerity, emergency, and long, late-night sittings. He had, however, a keen sense of humour, and was known to write humorous doggerel while on duty in the House. One such effort responded in kind to ponderings in verse by Prime Minister (Sir) Robert Menzies about what went on in the minds of the imperturbably discreet Clerks:

If we look glum and vacant stare,
When wigged and seated 'neath the Chair,
Please do not think 'tis Nature's way,
It's rather service for our pay.
For if some thoughts we dare repeat,
We'd find ourselves out in the street.
A Clerk-at-the-Table is like a bird,
And like a bird says not a word.

Tregear retired from parliamentary service on 31 December 1958. Menzies paid tribute to his 'complete integrity, complete capacity in his job, and complete impartiality' (H.R. Deb. 1–2.10.1958, 1895). He was appointed CBE in 1959. A former president of Canberra Rotary (1954–55), he became Honorary National Secretary of the National Heart Foundation of Australia in 1959 and was a director of Capital Television Ltd and of the Moore family company. In retirement, he and Doris travelled extensively, including to the United States and Europe. Tregear died in Canberra on 19 December 1976, survived by his wife and daughter.

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