

Turner, Sir Alan George: Clerk 1959–1971

Patricia Clarke

Alan George Turner (1906–78), eighth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 11 December 1906 at Marrickville, Sydney, only son and second child of English-born Frederick Richard Graystone Turner, bank manager, and his Queensland-born wife, Annie Purvis, née Marshall. His father was manager of the Bank of Australasia branch at Yarrowonga, Victoria, when Alan enrolled at Melbourne Grammar School as a boarder in 1921. He left at the end of 1923 after passing the Intermediate Certificate.

In 1924 Turner joined the House of Representatives staff and served successively as secretary to Speakers William Watt, Sir Littleton Groom, and Norman Makin. Early in 1927, Turner transferred to Canberra to work at the new Parliament House in preparation for the first Canberra sitting of the Commonwealth parliament on 9 May. On 7 September 1931 at Melbourne Grammar School chapel, he married Ina Arnot Maxwell, youngest daughter of George Arnot Maxwell, a Nationalist Party member of the House of Representatives. Gough Whitlam, who when a teenage student had observed their romance develop after Ina joined the staff of Telopea Park School, Canberra, in 1928 as a kindergarten teacher, described Turner as the ‘debonair, discreet young man from the staff of the Parliament who won her’ (H.R. Deb. 9.12.1971, 4497).

During World War II, Turner was seconded (1942–45) to the Department of Supply and Shipping. He was appointed Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees on 1 January 1946 and, on 15 December 1949, was promoted to Second Clerk Assistant. On 27 June 1955, he became Clerk Assistant and, on 1 January 1959, succeeded Allan Tregear as Clerk of the House. In 1960 the House Standing Orders Committee decided to undertake a comprehensive review of the orders, which had not substantially changed since Federation. Turner prepared a report that the committee presented to the House on 28 August 1962 and which was adopted in

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 65: Alan Turner.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

May 1963. The substantive procedural changes that followed involved the amendment of 101 of the 403 existing standing orders, the omission of sixty, and the insertion of fifty-nine new orders.

In 'a significant definition of an Australian parliamentary style' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 160), the complex and time-consuming procedure of preliminary consideration of financial proposals in Committees of Supply and of Ways and Means was abolished, and the initiation of spending and taxing legislation was vested wholly in the executive, not individual members. Replying to doubts about this reform expressed privately by the Clerk of the House of Commons, (Sir) Barnett Cocks, Turner wrote that 'the financial initiative is neatly tied up and I rather doubt whether it is necessary for us to now consider any alteration' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 160). Another major change was the omission of the committee stage of bills, provided that no member raised an objection. Two years after this reform was introduced, Turner regretfully described the resultant exemption of most bills as a 'somewhat strange trend' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 161). He ascribed this to members' preference for discussing general principles rather than detail, the number of bills that were of a machinery nature, and the federal character of much of the legislation presented to parliament, which was often based on prior agreement between the Commonwealth and the states.

In March 1964, the government approved reorganisations of the Senate and House of Representatives departments, with a focus on staffing reforms. The initiative came from Turner, who had the Second and Third Clerk Assistants, John (Jack) Pettifer and Douglas Blake, prepare a report on organisation, working arrangements, and general staffing. The report concluded that the staffing structure of the House had not kept up with changes in the power and structure of the federal government; increased numbers of parliamentarians; the shift of agencies to Canberra; expansion of the activities of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union; and greater committee work. Turner submitted recommendations to the Speaker, Sir John McLeay, for changes in staff duties; appointment of two new staff; reclassification of positions attracting extra duties; and redesignating the Clerk Assistant position as Deputy Clerk. Similar proposals were submitted to the President of the Senate, Sir Alister McMullin, by the Clerk of the Senate, Rupert Loof, after a review by the Senate Clerk Assistant, James Odgers. The President and the Speaker then successfully sought the concurrence of the Public Service Board. All this amounted to 'an important landmark in the history of parliamentary administration in so far as they ushered in a period of sustained staff growth and organisational change' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 417–18).

The same year, the government announced plans to amalgamate all appropriations, except those that could be contained in a separate special expenditure bill, into a single bill designated as dealing with ordinary annual services. As the Senate was constitutionally debarred from amending bills concerning such services, this

amounted to an attempt to limit its powers. The government relied on a legal opinion obtained from the solicitor-general that there were no valid objections to the inclusion of capital works expenditure appropriations within a single appropriations bill. When some government senators objected, the treasurer, Harold Holt, sought Turner's opinion; he responded by characterising their views as being 'in contradiction of strong legal opinions as to the meaning of the words "the ordinary annual services of the Government"' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 209). Nevertheless, Turner was conscious of the Senate's growing assertiveness, and so felt that the matter was one for decision not by the courts but rather by a political process involving both houses of parliament, without which it seemed 'inevitable that the Senate view will prevail' (Reid and Forrest 1989, 209). The issue was resolved in May 1965 when the government divided capital expenditure and ordinary annual services into separate appropriation bills.

In the 1965 New Year's Honours, Turner was appointed CBE for 'outstanding public service'. He became Secretary, Joint House Department, in June 1966. The politically turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s—during which he served successively under McLeay and, from 1967, Speaker (Sir) William Aston—frequently involved him in divisive parliamentary sittings during the prime ministerships of Holt, (Sir) John McEwen, (Sir) John Gorton, and (Sir) William McMahon. An attempt by Aston and Turner in 1970 to persuade the executive and members to appoint standing committees of the House of Representatives, similar to those established in the Senate, was unsuccessful.

Late in his term as Clerk, Turner was questioned exhaustively by the Privileges Committee as part of an inquiry into an alleged contempt of the House. This arose from an article in the *Daily Telegraph* of 27 August 1971 by the parliamentary reporter Alan Reid that reflected adversely on the presiding officer. Reid asserted that the House had 'ignominiously collapsed' because a group of opposition members had left the chamber after a quorum had been called, causing an adjournment until the next sitting day. Turner had been in the chamber at the time and refuted the allegation, consistent with evidence provided by his colleague Pettifer, who had also been present. The committee determined that the article indeed constituted contempt and that accordingly both Reid and David McNicoll, editor-in-chief of Australian Consolidated Press, were guilty. In the small hours of 9 December, the House voted along party lines to agree to the committee's findings but to not impose a penalty. Turner was later quoted as stating that 'the [Press] Gallery seems to be here because it is here ... The gallery has no formal right to exist and owes its privileges and access to the Chambers of the House of Representatives and the Senate and to its occupancy of rooms in the Parliament entirely to practice and tradition' (Chalmers 2011, 22).

During Turner's tenure as Clerk, he was actively involved in international parliamentary organisations. In 1958 he was secretary of the Australian delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in Rio de Janeiro and, from 1958 to 1971, he served as honorary secretary/treasurer of the Australian branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The professional journal of the Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Commonwealth Parliaments praised him for serving the branch with great dedication, 'furthering Australia's interests and reputation in the affairs of the Association' (*The Table* 1971, 13). He was an organiser of many of the association's conferences in Commonwealth countries—notably, those conducted in Australia in 1959 and 1970. Turner accompanied Aston to Commonwealth conferences of presiding officers and Clerks in Canada in 1969 and India in 1971, and at four conferences of presiding officers and Clerks from the Australasia/Pacific region.

On 10 December 1971, Turner retired and was succeeded by Norman Parkes. Aston understatedly described his Clerkship as 'a notable one', citing Turner's major revision of standing orders, the reorganisation of House staff, and the respect he had earned for his 'wise judgment and experienced counsel' (H.R. Deb. 9.12.1971, 4495–96). Prime Minister McMahon described Turner 'as a personal friend' (H.R. Deb. 9.12.1971, 4496). Turner's considerable achievements in modernising the management and practice of the House of Representatives are testimony to his energy and high standing among members. He was also praised for his courteous manner and non-partisan counsel. New members appreciated his convivial welcome and classes on the operation of the House. Throughout his working life and in retirement, Turner's chief recreation was golf.

Knighted for 'distinguished public service' in the 1972 New Year's Honours, Sir Alan died on 26 November 1978 in Canberra Hospital, survived by Lady Turner and their son. He was privately cremated and a memorial service was held at the Presbyterian Church of St Andrew, Forrest.

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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.2023.63