

Watt, William Alexander: Speaker 1923–1925

John Hawkins and John Anderson

William Alexander Watt (1871–1946), premier, company director, and fifth Speaker of the House of Representatives, was born on 23 November 1871 at Barfold, near Kyneton, Victoria, eleventh and youngest child of James Michie Watt, a farmer who had migrated from Scotland about 1843, and his Irish-born wife, Jane, née Douglas. After James's death in 1872, the family moved to Phillip Island and some six years later settled in North Melbourne. Billy, as he was then known, attended Errol Street State School until the age of fourteen. He worked variously as a newsboy, ironmonger, tanner, clerk, accountant, and eventually became a partner in a hay and corn store. It was rumoured that he was a member of a larrikin gang known as the Bouverie Street Push.

Watt compensated for his limited formal schooling by reading voraciously and taking evening classes at the Working Men's College (later RMIT University) in accountancy, grammar, logic, philosophy, and elocution. He further sharpened his rhetorical skills in the Australian Natives' Association and various debating and literary societies, and he was also active in the Australasian Federation League. He became a protégé of Alfred Deakin, later describing himself as a 'hero worshipper' (Watt 1944, v); he would deliver the oration at Deakin's funeral in 1919. On 21 December 1894, he married Florence Carrighan at the Presbyterian Church, Parkville; she was to die after childbirth in 1896. On 24 April 1907, at the Presbyterian Manse, Essendon, he married Emily Helena Seismann, daughter of Emily Collier and the late John Frederick Seismann, who came from a family of hoteliers, but who had died when Emily was just six.

In 1897 Watt defeated the fiery Labor leader George Prendergast in the seat of North Melbourne to enter the Victorian parliament, becoming one of the 'Young Australia' group of Federation enthusiasts. He served as postmaster-general in the McLean ministry in 1899, making him reportedly the youngest cabinet member in the Empire, but lost his seat to a resurgent Prendergast in 1900. While out of parliament,

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 66: William Watt.

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

he worked as a real estate agent and helped Deakin build the organisational wing of his Protectionist Party. Watt stood unsuccessfully for the first Senate as a Protectionist and was twice more defeated for the Victorian Legislative Assembly.

Returning to the Victorian parliament in 1902 as the member for East Melbourne, Watt switched to Essendon in 1904. Much of his next five years was spent sniping at the conservative premier (Sir) Thomas Bent. In 1909 Watt became the treasurer, deputy premier and the main force in the government of Premier John (Jack) Murray, with an unrivalled grasp of public finance. He acted as premier for six months in 1911 and was premier from May 1912 to June 1914 (other than for a thirteen-day Labor interregnum in December 1913). Notwithstanding opposition from the Legislative Council, the Murray-Watt governments established state secondary education, land taxation, and preferential voting, expanded irrigation, and reorganised public services. Watt was renowned for his oratory, having 'a remarkable command of language, a deep organ voice and formidable debating powers' (Edwards 1965, 79). These gifts were at times manifested in a less becoming propensity for sarcasm and for rhetorical flourishes that obscured his meaning; as one newspaper put it, 'ideals camouflaged behind sesquipedalian sentences' (*Sun* 1918, 3).

It was widely believed that Deakin had regarded Watt as his preferred successor. But (Sir) Joseph Cook was in the federal parliament and Watt was not when Deakin's fading powers forced him to step down in 1913. In early 1914, Watt accepted party requests and resigned the premiership to stand successfully for the blue-ribbon federal seat of Balaclava, despite a 6 per cent swing to the young Labor candidate John Curtin. As the government was defeated, Watt missed out on a ministry. He held the seat comfortably at five subsequent elections, being unopposed in 1922.

During World War I, Watt campaigned in favour of conscription. Plans emerged to form a government combining the Liberals and dissident pro-conscription National Labor members. While Liberals Joseph Cook, Sir John Forrest, and William Irvine all aspired to lead the proposed government, Watt realised that the Labor renegade William Morris Hughes would need to be leader for the plan to succeed and threatened to withdraw Victorian members from the Liberal Party. When a Nationalist Party government was formed in February 1917, Hughes would have preferred Watt as treasurer but was obliged to give the post to Forrest. Watt served instead as minister for works and railways. He and Forrest conducted a bitter feud within the cabinet until Forrest was elevated to a peerage and resigned in March 1918. Watt took over as treasurer and, concerned about the state of government finances, brought down an austere budget that greatly increased taxation.

In April 1918, Hughes and Cook sailed to London, leaving Watt acting as prime minister for the next sixteen months. Leading a weak and weary ministry and suffering heart trouble and nervous tension, he brought comparative calm and orderly processes to government. But his acting prime ministership was dominated by ongoing

squabbles with Hughes about who had ultimate authority to take decisions and the failure of both parties to inform the other of their actions—not helped by cables between Britain and Australia often taking more than a day to arrive. Both parties, but particularly Hughes, displayed a lack of aptitude for cooperative leadership. As acting prime minister, Watt in October 1918 had a new standing order created to introduce the 'guillotine' by which a government could rush legislation through the House with minimal debate (Reid and Forrest 1989, 152–53). When Hughes returned, Watt had to be persuaded to remain in the cabinet.

A product of the urban lower middle class, Watt was by now embedded in the social and political establishment. He had refused a knighthood, partly because he considered he had inadequate means to live up to it, but delighted in his appointment as privy counsellor in 1920 and as a commander of the Légion d'honneur. Manning Clark later portrayed this 'boy from Phillip Island' as having become 'heart and soul a "Yarraside" man' (Clark 1987, 103, 105). Yet during the Depression of the following decade, Watt was notably sympathetic to the unemployed and workers suffering wage cuts.

In April 1920, Watt reluctantly sailed to England for financial negotiations with the British government. Meanwhile, Hughes conducted negotiations with the British on wool, without informing him. Now the roles were reversed, with Watt wanting more autonomy and Hughes back in Australia seeking to control him. In a distraught state and still overseas, Watt resigned as treasurer in June, complaining by telegram that 'it would be incongruous for me to wear the garb of a plenipotentiary and the mind of a telegraph messenger' as Hughes's mere 'channel of communication between British ministers' (H.R. Deb. 2.7.1920, 2530). On his return to Australia in October, having for so long remained loyal to Hughes in public, he delivered a long and bitter speech to the House on his reasons for resigning, but by then most of his colleagues had lost interest and (Sir) Walter Massy-Greene supplanted him as Hughes's heir apparent. After the 1922 election gave the Country Party the balance of power in the House, Watt reportedly entered discussions with the Country Party leader, (Sir) Earle Page, about his heading a coalition government, but these came to nothing. By the time Hughes was finally deposed in February 1923, Watt was a lone figure in parliament and was passed over in favour of Stanley (Viscount) Bruce, who had been in parliament for less than five years. Reports that Watt declined Bruce's offer of a ministry, citing poor health, were probably inaccurate. To his surprise, Watt was instead offered the Speakership over the objections of the incumbent, Sir Elliot Johnson, that 'the position of Speaker should not be a matter for party spoils' (*Argus* 28 February 1923, 11).

Watt's selection was greeted with astonishment and outrage. Labor members drew on their anger that the formation of a Nationalist–Country Party coalition had denied them any chance of governing. His appointment was, said the member for Darling,

Arthur Blakeley, 'a fitting climax to one of the most disgraceful occurrences in the history of this Parliament' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1923, 18) and one that amounted to 'the elevation of a gentleman whom they fear to a position where he cannot speak' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1923, 18). Edward Riley, the member for South Sydney, praised Watt's predecessor and wondered why so substantive a figure as Watt had accepted the Speakership; 'perhaps it was the horsehair wig, and gown, and the fact that, as Speaker, he will have a nice young gentleman to carry the mace in front of him' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1923, 17). Watt replied with restraint: 'I assume that misunderstandings may arise between the Chair and honorable members on the floor of the House which mutual forbearance alone can remove or prevent' (H.R. Deb. 28.2.1923, 23). The *Argus* wondered whether a tragedy of sorts was unfolding, as 'it would be a high price to pay if in finding a Speaker we had lost Mr Watt' ('Ithuriel' 1923). Some suspected that the Speakership would allow him more time to tend to his growing business interests than would a portfolio. He had been chairman of Australian Farms Ltd since 1922; it aimed to attract migrants with capital but was liquidated in 1925.

However, Watt soon proved a capable Speaker, his popularity with other parliamentarians only occasionally marred by abrasive indiscretions. Page thought him endowed with 'a complete knowledge of all parliamentary forms and precedents, a ready and balanced mind, and a facility for promptness and decision' (Page 1963, 58), and approved of his efforts to build cross-party camaraderie at weekly afternoon teas in the Speaker's room. The long-serving Clerk of the House, Frank Green, considered Watt 'probably the best Speaker of the House we ever had', aided by 'a great sense of humour which he often used to break tension' (Green 1969, 60). He was similarly praised by a later Speaker, Norman Makin, as 'the doyen of all Speakers in the Commonwealth Parliament' due to a 'cool and just' demeanour that gave him 'a natural aptitude essential to succeed in this most important position of Parliament' (Makin c. 1962). Makin could not recall 'any instance when his ruling was challenged' (Makin c. 1962) and found Watt a mentor to young members, including himself. The opposition leader, Matthew Charlton, swept aside Labor's earlier concerns by declaring: 'I can say, without fear of contradiction, that we have never sat under a better Speaker' (H.R. Deb. 24.8.1923, 3674).

Watt's Speakership was nonetheless subject to a widely held assumption that he would return to the ministry, such as by resuming as treasurer should the Nationalist-Country Party coalition break up. There were also suggestions that the looming relocation of the parliament to Canberra would interfere unduly with his business interests. Shortly before the 1925 election, he announced that he would not contest the Speakership, and hinted that his interest in foreign affairs was grounds for his appointment to represent Australia in London. In reality, his unhappy experience as treasurer seems to have drained him of most of his ambition. He now became an 'open rebel' (Edwards 1965, 120), willing to cross the floor, such as when he opposed the abolition of Commonwealth per capita grants to the states. After parliament moved

to Canberra in 1927, he was present at fewer than half of the House's sittings and hardly spoke at all in the chamber during 1928 (Sawer 1956, 306 n.). As his interest in politics waned, Watt, from his base in Collins House, took up several chairmanships, among them of Dunlop-Perdriau Rubber, British Dominion Film Ltd, and Taranaki Oil Fields Ltd, and served as a director of Qantas and other companies. He was also the long-serving chairman of the Melbourne Cricket Ground trustees (1924–46), and the first Victorian president of the English-Speaking Union. On medical advice, he resigned his seat in July 1929.

Watt's broad, pugnacious face was likened to that of the Dickensian villain Bill Sikes (Edwards 1965, 79). While generally a conservative dresser, his manner was breezy, his humour witty though mordant, and his aplomb marred by fits of temper and a tendency to intolerance. An agnostic, he enjoyed reading, gardening, bridge, and billiards. He was a convivial member of the Yorick, Athenaeum, and West Brighton clubs, and of the Victoria Golf Club. Having suffered a disabling stroke in 1937, he died at his Toorak home on 13 September 1946. His wife, two sons, and three daughters survived him. Portraits by Emanuel Phillips Fox and William Longstaff are held by the Savage Club, Melbourne, and Parliament House, Canberra. Watt, with Billy Snedden, is one of two former treasurers who became Speaker. Today he is remembered less for his successful service as Speaker than for his unexpected failure to rise to the prime ministership.

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