

# **Wright, Bernard Clive: Clerk 2009–2013**

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Bernard Clive Wright, fifteenth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 5 July 1949 at Young, New South Wales, eldest of four children of locally born parents Heber Wright, farmer, and his wife, Mona. The family's farm near Boorowa was so isolated that Bernard's early schooling was through correspondence. He later attended All Hallows School, Bathurst (1959–60), and, after moving to Canberra with his family, St Edmund's College (1961) and Daramalan College (1962–67). At The Australian National University, he studied political science and Asian studies (BA, 1971). In December 1971, he joined the Department of Immigration as a clerk.

After becoming a graduate trainee, Wright was promoted in March 1972 to junior Parliamentary Officer in the Department of the House of Representatives. By February 1978, he had reached the top of the ranks and, in August 1981, was appointed a Senior Parliamentary Officer. Steady promotion continued: Clerk Assistant (Administration) (December 1982), Clerk Assistant (Procedure) (April 1986), and Clerk Assistant (Committees) (July 1990). On 5 February 1983, at St Vincent de Paul Church, Aranda, he married Maree Georgina Elliott, a nurse. They were to have a daughter and a son.

Wright developed a deep knowledge of issues of parliamentary privilege. In 1982–84, he was secretary to the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Privilege review of the law and practice of privilege in both houses. The committee's final report, presented in October 1984, included special thanks for his labours and resulted in major reforms being enshrined in the Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987. Twenty years after this legislation was enacted, Wright argued that, although it had reduced 'traditional powers and immunities, and the flexibility available to the houses in dealing with matters of privilege and contempt', the parliament was 'now able to point to a set of statutory and procedural arrangements that are not only more appropriate to contemporary parliamentary requirements but also more consistent with community expectations in terms of citizens' interests' (Wright 2007, 27). In April 1991, he became First Clerk Assistant, and was appointed Deputy Clerk in

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**Figure 67: Bernard Wright.**

Source: Department of the House of Representatives.

September 1997. His increasingly evident ‘very considerable degree of intellectual leadership’ (H.R. Deb. 12.12.2013, 2654) arose from several different and demanding career roles. These included a major contribution to preparing successive editions of the authoritative *House of Representatives Practice* (as assistant editor, 1989, 1997, 2001 and 2005), which was described by opposition leader John Hewson as ‘the bible of this place’ (H.R. Deb. 14.3.1991, 2045). Wright received the Centenary Medal in 2003.

In December 2009, Wright became Clerk of the House. Eight months later, he was confronted with a situation unprecedented in the previous seventy years. The federal election of August 2010 resulted in a ‘hung’ forty-third parliament, in which no single party or pre-election alliance held an outright majority. The government of Julia Gillard managed to retain office, despite losing a number of divisions in the House. This situation lasted until the election of September 2013 and placed many unexpected day-to-day demands on the Clerk and the staff of his department. Members, too, found themselves navigating the unknowns of minority government, which, said one of their number, made each sitting day ‘another day in paradigm’ (Wright, June 2013, 1). The parliament saw ‘points of parliamentary law and procedure that had usually been of somewhat academic interest become matters of considerable and immediate political significance’ (Wright, June 2013, 5). Weekly sitting hours for the House and the Federation Chamber were increased from 48 to 56, mainly to accommodate private members’ business. The Selection Committee was re-established to resume its role in prioritising and allocating time for private members’ business, and committee and delegation reports. In this one parliament, Wright worked with three different Speakers: Harry Jenkins, Peter Slipper, and Anna Burke. He was senior editor of the sixth edition of *House of Representatives Practice* (2012), which analysed and placed in reassuring context the innovations and complexities of the forty-third parliament.

Although media attention was focused on the drama of debate and voting in the chamber, Wright documented how ‘the impact of the hung parliament on the working of House and joint committees has been no less significant’ (Wright, July 2013, 1). Consideration of bills by committees increased substantially, so ‘the taxpayer received good value for the cost of supporting committees during the 43rd Parliament’, with ‘the House committee system well and truly tested’ (Wright, July 2013, 5, 8). There were also important developments in funding and operations. The House Appropriations and Administration Committee was appointed to improve the department’s financial management and administrative processes, and the Main Committee, established in 1994 as a debating chamber functioning parallel to the House on a limited range of matters, was recast as the Federation Chamber. Anthony Albanese, leader of the House, later recalled that it was in large part due to Wright that both the House of Representatives and the government had functioned ‘effectively’ during this ‘difficult parliament’ (H.R. Deb. 12.12.2013, 2653).

As Clerk, Wright continued to publish extensively on parliamentary practice and procedure. Twenty-five years after the passing of the Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987, he wrote in an international journal for parliamentary staff that specifying the “powers, privileges and immunities” of each House of a national Parliament’ had so far not led to the loss of ‘desirable flexibility’, but he added that its relevance to other parliaments was still ‘an open question’ (Wright 2012, 45, 52, 53). He also maintained a strong interest in how the constitutional debates leading to Federation in 1901 had shaped Commonwealth parliamentary thinking and practice, and their continuing relevance for latter-day parliamentary staff. In a trenchant analysis of the 1890s constitutional conventions and related meetings, he concluded that delegates’ success in negotiating an agreed federal compact illustrated how ‘traditional parliamentary processes can be adapted and used’ and had ‘allowed a political solution to be negotiated to a great legal and governmental challenge’ (Wright, January 2013, 28). The delegates had, Wright observed, the support of experienced secretaries, clerks, and assistant clerks drawn from Australia’s colonial parliaments, including Charles Gavan Duffy, later Clerk of the House of Representatives, Edwin Gordon Blackmore, later Clerk of the Senate, and the future solicitor-general (Sir) Robert Garran. Wright also drew on records of the conventions to explore the origins of financial powers granted to the executive and parliament—‘matters of high importance in terms of their long-term implications’ and ‘significant for each House of the Parliament because of its respective rights and responsibilities’ (Wright, May 2013, 26).

Wright retired in December 2013. Prime Minister Tony Abbott spoke of his ‘total dedication to the welfare of this parliament’, and the leader of the opposition, Bill Shorten, added that the ‘truly modest’ Wright had found his ‘calling’ as a parliamentary Clerk (H.R. Deb. 12.12.2013, 2650, 2651). At Speaker Bronwyn Bishop’s request, all members in the chamber farewelled him by standing in tribute. In retirement, he devoted time to farming—a lifelong interest—and continued to write and speak on parliamentary subjects. He wrote in a scholarly survey of developments in both houses over the period 1988–2013 that, in the years leading up to 2013, ‘the Parliament’s influence seemed greater than had been the case in the 1970s and 1980s’, making the frequently applied ‘rubber stamp’ label ‘both lazy and misleading’ (Wright 2015, 36, 38). In 2015 he was appointed AO. He served on the Council for the Order of Australia from 2014 and on the Advisory Council (later Board) of the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House (appointed deputy chair in 2016). Wright once said it had been his ‘good fortune’ to work closely with national leaders characterised by ‘much idealism, personal integrity, considerable ability and deep commitment’, making them ‘worthy of the legacy of the Founders’ (January 2013, 28).

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