

Foreword

It is a great honour and pleasure to contribute the foreword for this most important publication—a biographical dictionary of key figures in the Australian House of Representatives.

During the period I was the Clerk of the House the idea was developed, in conjunction with the then Speaker, the Hon. Tony Smith, to prepare biographies of all the former Speakers, Deputy Speakers and Clerks of the Australian House of Representatives. The thinking behind this proposal was that the House of Representatives had a significant historical tradition which, while it had been very well documented in terms of its practice and procedure in the form of successive editions of *House of Representatives Practice*,¹ had not been as well documented in terms of the personalities who performed in the key roles of leadership in the House.² Our hope was that, by compiling comprehensive biographies of all those who had undertaken the roles of Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Clerk, we would ‘bring to life’ the personalities that lay behind what might otherwise be seen as the dry nature of parliamentary procedure and practice. In addition, it would add a historical perspective to the work of the House, building a sense of tradition and legacy for the House of Representatives as an institution. As I noted when the project was launched, ‘It will tell us a much more reflective story about the role of the House and how it works.’

The individual biographies show the diversity of the personalities and backgrounds of those who have held these offices. There is much that is both fascinating and revealing in the individual biographies. For example, there are the circumstances surrounding the collapse of the first Speaker, Sir Frederick Holder, in the chamber of the House during a particularly torrid debate, shortly after Holder uttered the words ‘dreadful, dreadful’, and leading to his death soon after. Then there is Deputy Speaker (then Chairman of Committees) John Moore Chanter, who made a controversial

1 The latest edition is D. R. Elder, ed., *House of Representatives Practice: Seventh Edition* (Canberra: Department of the House of Representatives, 2018).

2 There has, of course, been much political commentary on the House of Representatives and many biographies of prime ministers and other members of the House, but focused on executive rather than parliamentary roles.

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(and probably incorrect) ruling allowing private members to propose new taxes or an increase in existing taxes during the committee stages (now consideration-in-detail stages) of bills. The ruling survived for more than twenty years before being overturned by a later Chairman of Committees. And there is the background to the sixth Clerk of the House, Frank Green, who was the only Clerk to publish a memoir on this time in office, and, at least partly, as a result of his disgruntlement with the decision of the House in the 1955 privilege case of Browne and Fitzpatrick.

The individual biographies make for fascinating reading in themselves. The linking pieces about the roles of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, and the Clerk, prepared by staff of the Department of the House of Representatives and accompanying the individual biographies, draw together themes from the biographies to illustrate how the respective parliamentary offices have operated and evolved since Federation. They are a critical additional component as they integrate the personalities with the evolution of the House of Representatives as a distinctly Australian institution from its Westminster heritage.

It is probably not surprising to note that a number of Deputy Speakers used the experience to then go on to serve as Speaker. This includes two female Deputy Speakers, Joan Child and Anna Burke, who became only two of three women to have served as Speaker. The biographies and the general pieces also demonstrate the ties between the respective officeholders, with both Speakers and Deputy Speakers being supported in their 'lonely' roles by the Clerks. It would be fair to say that these relationships ranged at times from the very close and friendly to the more distant. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, it was always critical to the way the House was able to perform.

It is a great credit to the National Centre of Biography in The Australian National University (ANU), which was engaged to undertake the preparation and publication of the biographies, that his work has been completed in such a fine way. I note in particular the work of Dr Stephen Wilks, who has coordinated the project.

The project has been overseen by an expert advisory group, chaired by a former Deputy Clerk of the House, Catherine Cornish, and comprising Emeritus Professor Judith Brett, La Trobe University; Emeritus Professor Geoff Gallop, University of Sydney; Mr Ian Hancock, School Visitor, National Centre of Biography, ANU; and Professor Paul Strangio, Monash University. They are to be congratulated for the way in which the project has fulfilled its original intention.

Finally, I believe this publication of the biographies of key officeholders of the House and the general essays about the offices themselves that accompany them, makes not only an important contribution to Australian history more generally, but also

to building the sense of the tradition of the House as one of the key institutions of Australian democracy. The publication will provide a rich source of information for all those with an interest in parliamentary matters. It will also enhance the understanding the general public has of the place of the House of Representatives in Australian society.

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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.