



STEPHEN HOLT INVESTIGATES THE PAPERS OF A FAMILY THAT SERVED THE NATION'S PARLIAMENT FOR MORE THAN 80 UNINTERRUPTED YEARS

# The Parliamentary Pettifers

**T**HE RECURRENCE OVER MORE THAN one generation of surnames such as Anthony, Beazley, Crean and Downer reminds us of the importance of family connections in Australia's political history. But there is another form of permanence to be found in the Commonwealth Parliament. Individual members come and go with each election but the staff who serve the two houses of parliament—the attendants, Hansard reporters, clerical and research officers, librarians and so on—can, if they are good, stay on forever. Theirs is usually an anonymous and sometimes unacknowledged contribution and yet one which is essential and unceasing. Continuity is their forte and strength. It is at this level that what appears to be the longest unbroken connection between one family and the Commonwealth Parliament can be found.

The family in question consisted of Tom Pettifer, an original and long-serving member of the parliamentary staff in both Melbourne and Canberra, and his son John Athol (widely known as Jack) who later rose to the important position of Clerk of the House of Representatives. Between them, the two Pettifers served without interruption on the staff of the Commonwealth Parliament from 1901 to 1982, when Jack Pettifer retired.

Tom and Jack Pettifer were model servants of parliament. Their dedication, courtesy and integrity were unflinching. They were able to witness firsthand the nation's leaders on a regular basis but there was never any question of their providing the press with lurid copy. When he retired, Jack Pettifer (b.1919) was asked to write his memoir (as had a predecessor, Frank Green) but never did so. However, happily for future historians of the Commonwealth Parliament, the vow of silence was not absolute. After Tom Pettifer's

death, a bundle of papers relating to his career was deposited in the National Library of Australia. In addition, the retirement of his son prompted parliamentary and press tributes which contained nuggets of valuable information. The ready availability of these biographical resources at the Library allows us to put together the story of one family's unique life at the hub of Australian politics.

Tom Pettifer was a young lad when he joined the staff of the Commonwealth Parliament on 1 May 1901, at its temporary home in Melbourne's Parliament House. He started off as a lift attendant. This was a humble enough position but nevertheless it was a crucial step in his career, since it meant that from the day he started he came into direct and frequent contact with the nation's leaders. Many members were alarmingly overweight—a fair few weighed in at well over 100 kilograms—and they preferred to avoid climbing stairs if they could. Tom's deftness as a lift attendant was appreciated.

Tom was fascinated with the men he ferried around the legislative precincts. To his youthful eyes, the early federal statesmen of Australia seemed larger than life. He loved seeing them perform at close quarters. Almost half a century later, when he drafted a brief pre-retirement account of his career, the memories came flooding back. 'All of the Ministers at that time wore silk hats & long coats and quite a few members also wore that attire,' he recalled. During the duller debates, the free-trade champion

ABOVE  
Unknown photographer  
*J.A. Pettifer and Douglas Blake at the Head of the Table in the House of Representatives, Canberra, c.1980*  
b&w negative; 10.0 x 12.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn4503242

BELOW  
Unknown author and photographer  
*Clerk of House to Retire*  
reproduced from *The Canberra Times*, 7 May 1982  
Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
NX 254



The Clerk of the House of Representatives, Mr Tom Pettifer

## Clerk of House to retire

The House of Representatives and other members of the Clerk of the House, Mr John Pettifer, who has served since 1901, will retire on 31 July.

Mr Pettifer occupied the post of Clerk of the House for a period of 81 years, 4 months and 10 days, and was the longest-serving Clerk of the House in the world.

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George Reid (1845–1918) ‘often used to snore so loudly that he had to be called to order’. Alfred Deakin (1856–1919), Reid’s protectionist rival and a renowned orator, ‘would make the Hansard reporter go at 200 words a minute when at his best’. It was impossible to forget such things.

Tom’s fascination with parliamentary life caused him to hang on to memorabilia, and interesting items survive in his personal papers. He kept the program for the banquet held in honour of the imperial titan Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850–1916) when he visited Melbourne in 1910. A stray postcard sent from Gympie, Queensland, to the Labor leader Andrew Fisher (1862–1928) likewise ended up in his personal collection. Pettifer also kept brochures relating to the state receptions for visiting naval contingents from the United States (the ‘Great White Fleet’ in 1908) and from Japan (1924).

In March 1913, Tom was included in the official party that travelled by train to Queanbeyan, New South Wales, and then by a fleet of service cars to Canberra, for the official naming and foundation of the nation’s new federal capital. When he got to Capital Hill for the ceremony, his overwhelming impression was that the surrounding countryside still

seemed to be completely untouched by human endeavour. A more tangible memento was a presentation box (containing a cigar, cigarettes and matches) that he received and treasured for the rest of his life.

By 1919, Tom was a senior attendant. A further move upwards came after the federal politicians stopped meeting in Melbourne in 1927.

As part of the early arrangements in Canberra, Pettifer succeeded in 1933 to the position of parliamentary housekeeper. He was responsible for looking after Parliament House on a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week basis. Tom and his wife Annie and their two children, Jean and Jack, were able to live in a flat on the premises where, for one reason or another, politicians visited frequently. ‘Billy Hughes was always popping in for a chat,’ Jack later recalled.

Like most of his colleagues on the parliamentary staff, Tom Pettifer found it a shock to move from busy Melbourne to the infant capital’s pastoral tranquillity. As time passed, he grew to like Canberra, although he was never reconciled to its arctic Julys. Proximity to the occasional public ceremony remained a consolation. Among Tom’s souvenirs from the 1930s were the programs for the visit of King George V’s son, the Duke of Gloucester, and for the festivities which celebrated the coronation of King George VI.

Tom, it seems, was no stranger to office politics. Late in 1945, now in his sixties and laid up in hospital for a while, he wrote an official letter to his departmental superiors, making it clear that he had no intention of handing over his keys and authority as parliamentary housekeeper to any person who was not a fellow officer of the Joint House Department. Earlier, his attentiveness in monitoring Sunday morning visitors to Parliament House and their usage of its tennis courts likewise generated official correspondence.

In 1948, after 47 years of service, Tom Pettifer retired and moved to a normal suburban house in Canberra. At the time of his death, aged 84 in 1969, he was the last surviving staff member from the inaugural Commonwealth Parliament. The Pettifer connection with parliament was far from over, however. Tom’s son, Jack, having spent his



youth on the premises, had embarked on his own career in Parliament House. In 1939, after a period of employment in the Prime Minister's Department (now the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) and private study, he joined the staff of the House of Representatives as an accounts clerk. His daily journey to and from work was, as he later observed, 'just a walk along the corridor' from his family's abode.

During World War II, Jack served with the Royal Australian Air Force in Britain as a coastal command pilot but when peace came he returned to Canberra. His upbringing in Parliament House turned out to be an excellent springboard for a career as one of the clerks of the House of Representatives. These officers were responsible for providing impartial and authoritative advice on the rules and proceedings of the House. During sittings of the House, they sat silent and bewigged at the right and left hand of the Speaker and, even amidst the liveliest of debates, maintained an air of inscrutable wisdom. Such owliness eventually inspired one member, Robert Gordon Menzies (1894–1978), to publish a waggish piece of parliamentary verse:

TWO WISE OLD OWLS sat at the table:  
Their wigs were grey, their gowns  
were sable;  
They looked so sad, so melancholy.  
As if depressed by HUMAN FOLLY.

Pettifer evinced the close attention to detail and dignified reserve that a good senior parliamentary officer needed and his rise was steady. Every few years or so, there was an unobtrusive promotion. He was Serjeant-at-Arms in 1954, Third Clerk-Assistant in 1955, Second Clerk-Assistant in 1959, Clerk-Assistant in 1964, Deputy Clerk in 1971 and, finally, Clerk of the House in 1977. His impartiality was never in doubt and his expertise was proffered in a calm and unassuming manner. He enjoyed the respect of both sides of the House.

The closest controversy that ever came to damaging Pettifer was in the wake of Sir John Kerr's dismissal of the Gough Whitlam government in 1975. In a contribution to *e Table*, a London journal whose readership comprised senior parliamentary officers from the British Commonwealth, Pettifer described the dismissal as 'a startling and dismaying experience'. The mask of imperturbability

had slipped for a moment but, happily, there were no adverse consequences. Pettifer's heartfelt comment did not stand in the way of his deserved promotion to Clerk of the House soon after.

The high point of Pettifer's dedication and commitment came in 1981 when *House of Representatives Practice*, a definitive work on the lower house rules and procedures, of which he was the editor, was published. His retirement a few months later drew appreciative comments from the nation's top political figures, including both Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (b.1930), who described Pettifer as 'a great servant of this House and, through it, of Australia', and Leader of the Opposition Bill Hayden (b.1933), who said that Pettifer was 'unremittingly dedicated to making the democratic parliamentary institution work'. Further appreciation of his work in the parliament came when he was honoured by being made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE).

Since he retired, Jack Pettifer's interests have included membership of the Canberra and District Historical Society. This involvement is particularly fitting given his family's fascinating ringside view of historic events, dating back to when young Tom Pettifer spirited the first federal politicians up and down in a lift.

From 1901 onwards, the parliamentary Pettifers had a unique career, one whose long duration we can better appreciate by drawing on a range of biographical resources available in the Library.

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OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
**The boxed cigar, cigarettes and matches presented to Tom Pettifer in 1913**  
tobacco, paper and wood; 1.9 x 12.3 x 5.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an7852943

Unknown photographer  
**The Last Sitting of the House of Representatives in Melbourne, 24 March 1927**  
b&w negative; 10.0 x 12.5 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn4503539

William James Mildenhall (1891–1962)  
**Parliament House**  
b&w photograph  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an11030057-92

**Memorabilia from the foundation of Canberra in 1913, collected by Tom Pettifer**  
Papers of Thomas Joseph Pettifer, 1906–1967  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 8568

BELOW  
**'Looking Back Over 47 Years on the Parliamentary Staff, Thomas Pettifer's handwritten account of his career**  
Papers of Thomas Joseph Pettifer, 1906–1967  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 8568