

History to be created and repeated

Travel 80 kilometres north-east of Adelaide and you reach one of Australia's premier wine regions, the Barossa Valley. You also arrive in the Federal electorate of Wakefield, which has a special connection to Federation and its centenary.

One hundred years ago, when the Members of the House of Representatives chose their first Speaker, they selected Frederick William Holder, who was to become the first Member for Wakefield. In May 2001, when the House returns to its original home in Melbourne to celebrate its 100th anniversary, it will again be the Member for Wakefield who sits in the Speaker's chair.

"It's a remarkable coincidence," says Neil Andrew, current Speaker and, for the past 18 years, the Member for Wakefield.

"What's more remarkable is that two people from the same rural seat in South Australia, one who started out as a teacher and one who was a primary producer, could have the opportunity to serve in one of Parliament's most important positions at two key moments in our nation's history.

"To me that says a lot about the type of democracy that Federation has given us."

Frederick William Holder was an ardent advocate for Federation, representing South Australia at the federal convention of 1897 that helped push Australia towards nationhood. Having been Premier, Treasurer and Minister for Industry in the South Australian Government, Holder's preferred choice was to serve in the first Federal Ministry. When that opportunity was not offered to him, he graciously accepted the role of first Speaker of the House.

When nominated for the House's top job, Holder was described as being "a man of great judgement and of large experience" with "the ability and vitality to be firm, strong and diplomatic". According to Speaker Andrew, those qualities are still required for the job today.

"Above all, you need to be even-handed and not too entrenched in your own views," says Neil Andrew. "You need to accommodate the diversity of opinion that is represented in the House and recognise the absolute right of Members to voice their views.

"People do not always appreciate that you can exercise authority as a Speaker and still allow all points of view to be expressed. In my view, authority and free speech can sit comfortably with each other."

While the skills of Speakership have remained constant through the House's first century, the House that Neil Andrew presides over is a much different forum to that which first met in 1901. To start with, the number of Members has doubled and it is no longer just a male domain. Now there are 35 women Members.

Neil Andrew suggests that the atmosphere of the House has changed considerably, reflecting the immense changes that have occurred in Australian society over the past century.

"Passions seemed to run higher in 1901," says Speaker Andrew. "As a nation we were finding our feet and we felt a greater sense



The first Speaker of the House of Representatives. Portrait: Sir Frederick William Holder (1916) by George Webb (1861 - 1943), Historic Memorials Collection, Canberra – courtesy of the Parliament House Art Collection, Joint House Department, Canberra ACT

of vulnerability. We were less exposed to international influences and less open to other cultures. That was reflected in both the composition of the House and in the debates that characterised its early years.

"Some of the statements that were made and actions that were taken back then, particularly on racial issues, would be considered unacceptable today. But you have to remember that the House reflected the attitudes and opinions that prevailed at the time.

"Today," says Neil Andrew, "the House is more accommodating of change and more tolerant of diversity. This reflects the environment in which the House now operates.

"Members do not just represent the Australian people, they reflect them. When society changes, the House changes, and that's the way it should be. Sometimes change takes time, but that's because the House is evolutionary not revolutionary – just as Federation was evolution not revolution."

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According to Speaker Andrew, the House has become less formal over time, reflecting the more relaxed mindset of modern Australian society.

"The rules of the House are not as rigid as they once were, nor are they as rigidly enforced.

"Previously, as a disciplinary measure, a Speaker could prevent a Member from speaking in the House simply by ignoring that Member. No Speaker would get away with that today."

One problem that continues to plague the House as it did in 1901 is public disquiet over how its proceedings are conducted. It's a familiar issue for the man in the hot seat.

"People seem to have the impression that today's Members are more rambunctious than their predecessors," says Neil Andrew. "That's just not true. Debates in the early years were just as vigorous as they are now."

In fact in 1909, after a particularly raucous debate, Speaker Holder collapsed in the Chamber and later died. His last words were reported to be: "Dreadful, dreadful."

"Sometimes people unfairly compare the behaviour of Members to schoolchildren," says Speaker Andrew. "But the House is not a schoolyard. It is a forum of competing views and ideologies where Members are asked to consider issues of national significance affecting the lives of many people. From time to time, this means that debates get heated. This just reflects the fact that Members take their jobs very seriously.

"Each Speaker since Federation has had to deal with various challenges in maintaining order in the House, and each Speaker has dealt with those challenges in his or her own way. History will be the real judge of how successful each Speaker has been."

When Speaker Andrew calls the House to order on 10 May from exactly the same chair that Speaker Holder did 100 years ago to the day, it will indeed be history that he will be creating and repeating. Moreover, to rekindle that link with 1901, Neil Andrew has invited the granddaughters of Sir Frederick William Holder to the ceremonial sittings to join in the historic celebrations.



Speaker Neil Andrew (right) and Senate President Margaret Reid (left) with New Zealand Speaker Jonathan Hunt (centre) who presented the Hans Heysen painting Milford Sound, New Zealand as a gift from the New Zealand Parliament to the Australian Parliament to mark the Centenary of Federation. The painting can be viewed in the first-floor public area of Parliament House. Photo: AUSPIC

A champion of Federation

As well as being the first Speaker of the House of Representatives, Sir Frederick William Holder was a driving force behind the Federation movement in South Australia. Following his death in 1909, *The Adelaide Advertiser* wrote of Sir Frederick: "He worked mightily for the consummation of Australian unity, and visited almost every important centre in South Australia to explain the provisions of the draft Constitution. So indefatigable was he in the work of this campaign that he delivered as many as seven or eight

addresses in a single week to secure the realization of the great project he had so much at heart. Indeed, it is acknowledged that his influence helped largely to secure the preponderant vote in this State in favour of Federation."

About the House is grateful to Mrs Margaret Denton and Mr Ian Denton, granddaughter and great grandson of Sir Frederick William Holder, for providing the above information.