

History Notes: Speakers of the Legislative Assembly
July 2016. Updated August 2017

Speakers of the LA

Sir James Lee Steere: son of a fox hunting squire

The first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly was Sir James Lee Steere. He was born in Surrey, England in 1830 to a 'fox hunting Tory squire' who sat in the House of Commons for the western division of Surrey. In 1859 James Lee Steere married the 'belle of Perth', Catherine Anne Leake, sister of Luke Leake, first Speaker of the Legislative Council, and the following year they migrated to Western Australia. Lee Steere was offered a partnership with pastoralist, JH Monger for a property on the upper Blackwood River. He purchased Jayees Station, a 100,000 acre property in the Blackwood district. Governor Hampton nominated Lee Steere in 1868 to the Legislative Council. In 1870 he won the seat of Wellington but lost it in February 1880, however he was elected in a by-election in May that year for the seat of Swan. In 1884 he did not contest Swan but the next year he was nominated as member of the Legislative Council. In May 1886, the Speaker of the Legislative Council, Sir Luke Leake died on a visit to London and Lee Steere was elected to the position. The first parliament under responsible government was elected in 1890 and Lee Steere stood and won the lower house seat of Nelson. The same year he was elected Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. He was Speaker for thirteen years until his death on 1 December 1903 at St George's Terrace, Perth.



The last Executive Council before responsible government in WA, c1890
James Lee Steere is standing at the back on the right hand side.
Photograph courtesy of State Library of WA: [BA559/94](#)



"Honourable members, I desire to thank you for having placed me in this dignified and honourable position, as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. I can assure you I value it very highly indeed, believing as I do that it is one of the most dignified positions which any man can hold in any country, that of Speaker of the representatives in the people's House."

Sir James Lee Steere

Parliamentary Debates
(WA Hansard)

17 August 1897

Hon Peter Watson: Telegram boy to Speaker of the House

Peter Bruce Watson was born in Reservoir, Victoria on 30 May 1947 to air force officer, Frank Watson and his wife, Peggy Watson. He was educated at Hutton St Primary School, Northcote and Sale high schools in Victoria. When his father retired from the Royal Australian Air Force in 1961, the family moved to Perth and Watson attended Perth Modern School.

Peter Watson began his working life as a telegram boy for the Post Master General and worked his way up to become a post office manager. He also ran a newsagency in Denmark, WA.

In 1968 Peter represented Australia at the Mexico Olympics. He fell ill the night before his

1,500 metres running event and ran 10 seconds slower than expected. However he still holds WA's 1500 metres record.

In 2000 Peter Watson joined the Australian Labor Party. He was elected to the seat of Albany on 10 February 2001 defeating Kevin Prince, a Minister in the Richard Court government. He has been re-elected ever since.

In May 2017 Peter Watson was elected to the role of Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia. He had acted in the role twice between 2005 to 2013. He was also Shadow Minister for Sport and Recreation from 9 April 2013 to 11 March 2017.

Fatherly advice

"My father always had three pieces of advice for me: listen to what other people say; treat others as I want to be treated; and that I would get back only what I put in."

Inaugural Speech
Legislative Assembly
Western Australian Debates
(Hansard)
22 May 2001



*Premier Mark McGowan, new Speaker Peter Watson and member for Kwinana Roger Cook yesterday. Picture: Simon Santi. Courtesy **The West Australian**, 12 May 2017, 10:30am*

“Not of their own initiative...”

The Speaker is the presiding officer of the Legislative Assembly. At the start of a new Legislative term, the members of the House elect a Speaker, “not of their own initiative, but in obedience to the Governor’s command”. The roles of the Speaker are based on the constitution but have evolved from Westminster traditions and Western Australia’s political history. The Speaker applies the Standing Orders (rules) and practices of the Legislative Assembly. The Speaker must exercise fairness and political impartiality to all members, despite their political allegiance. Speakers have rarely entered debate in the House however before responsible government was created in 1890, the Speaker of the Legislative Council sometimes debated and voted on the floor of the chamber.



John Hearman, Speaker, c28 July 1966
Parliament of WA collection

John Merrifield Hearman was born in Richmond, England, 1910 and emigrated to Australia as a child. He was a student at Guildford Grammar school. From 1930 he farmed at Donnybrook, WA and he served in the army during World War II. Hearman was elected to the seat of Blackwood in 1950 which he held until 1968. He was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly from 1959 to 1968. John Hearman died in Donnybrook in 1994.

Speaker’s role

The Speaker’s tasks are to:

- apply Standing Orders (rules) and practices of the chamber
- ask members to speak, ask questions, and move motions (for which they have given notice)
- maintain order
- vote only in the case of a tie
- guide members in their behaviour, language and dress
- control visitors’ behaviour in the public gallery
- act as spokesman for the Parliament
- administer Parliament House with the President and the executive management team
- promote the role of the House to the public.

Speakers past

The role of the Speaker is an ancient office of the Westminster parliamentary system. The first Speaker was appointed in 1377. The House of Commons was only allowed to address humble petitions to the Crown through its appointed spokesman, the Speaker. When the opinion of the majority was agreed, the Speaker was sent to express it to the Crown. At least nine British Speakers died violently because the monarch did not like what they said.

The representative government phase in Western Australia started in 1870. The new constitutional arrangement required a member of the Legislative Council to be elected in the honorary role of Speaker before any business began. On 5 December 1870 at the first Legislative Council meeting, Sir Luke Leake, MLC Perth accepted the speakership. When responsible government was established in 1890, Sir James Lee Steere was elected as Speaker for the Legislative Assembly.

Traditionally Speakers have worn a wig and gown. The current Speaker, the Hon Peter Watson will depart from tradition and not wear the black robes of office.

Speakers of the Legislative Assembly

No	Name	Period as Speaker	Electorate	Party
1	Lee Steere, James George	30 Dec 1890 – 30 Nov 1903	Nelson	-
2	Harper, Charles	2 Dec 1903 – 27 July 1904	Beverley Forrest	-
3	Quinlan, Timothy Francis	23 Nov 1905 – 8 Oct 1911	Toodyay	Lib
4	Troy, Michael Francis	1 Nov 1911 – 13 Feb 1917	Mount Magnet	ALP
5	Johnston, Edward Bertram	13 Feb 1917 – 1 Mar 1917	Williams-Narrogin	CP
6	Gardiner, James	1 Mar 1917 – 28 June 1917	Irwin	CP
7	Taylor, George	19 July 1917 – 23 July 1924	Mount Margaret	Nat
8	Walker, Thomas	24 July 1924 – 29 July 1930	Kanowna	ALP
9	Stubbs, Sydney	30 July 1930 – 17 July 1933	Wagin	CP
10	Panton, Alexander Hugh	18 July 1933 – 24 Mar 1938	Leederville	ALP
11	Johnson, William Dartnell	4 Aug 1938 – 2 Aug 1939	Guildford-Midland	ALP
12	Sleeman, Joseph Bertram	3 Aug 1939 – 31 July 1947	Fremantle	ALP
13	North, Charles Frederic John	31 July 1947 – 5 Aug 1953	Claremont	Lib
14	Rodoreda, Aloysius Joseph	6 Aug 1953 – 1 Aug 1956	Pilbara	ALP
15	Hegney, James	2 Aug 1956 – 29 June 1959	Mount Hawthorn	ALP
16	Hearman, John Merrifield	30 June 1959 – 23 Mar 1968	Blackwood	Lib
17	Guthrie, Hugh Norman	25 July 1968 – 20 Feb 1971	Subiaco	Lib
18	Toms, John Mervin	15 July 1971 – 8 Oct 1971	Ascot	ALP
19	Norton, Daniel	16 Nov 1971 – 30 Mar 1974	Gascoyne	ALP
20	Hutchinson, Ross	22 May 1974 – 19 Feb 1977	Cottesloe	Lib
21	Thompson, Ian David	24 May 1977 – 21 Mar 1983	Kalamunda	Lib
22	Harman, John Joseph	22 May 1983 – 8 Feb 1986	Maylands	ALP
23	Barnett, Michael	10 June 1986 – 17 June 1993	Rockingham	ALP
24	Clarko, James George	17 June 1993 – 14 Dec 1996	Marmion	Lib
25	Strickland, George Joseph	6 Mar 1997 – 10 Feb 2001	Innaloo	Lib
26	Riebeling, Fredrick	1 May 2001 – 6 Sept 2008	Burru	ALP
27	Woodhams, Grant Allen	6 Nov 2008 – 9 March 2013	Moore	NPA
28	Sutherland, Michael William	11 April 2013 – 11 March 2017	Mount Lawley	Lib
29	Watson, Peter Bruce	11 May 2017 – present	Albany	ALP

Abbreviations

ALP	Australian Labor Party
CP	Country Party
Ind	Independent
Lib	Liberal
Nat	Nationalist
NPA	National Party of Australia

Sources

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