

Chapter 3 The Parliamentary Buildings and Precincts

3.1 The building

The Parliament of New South Wales was the first Parliament to be established in Australia. It occupies the oldest building in the Sydney city centre and is the oldest continuously used legislative chamber in Australia.

The Parliament occupies part of what was once the nation's first permanent hospital. The colonnaded central part of Parliament House facing Macquarie Street was completed in 1816 as part of Governor Macquarie's "Rum Hospital". In 1829 the premises were appropriated to the use of the Executive and the Legislative Council. Minor alterations were carried out in June 1829 to the building and on Friday 21 August 1829 the second session of the Legislative Council in that year was held in the building which, with additions, has housed the Parliament ever since.¹

3.2 The Chamber

As with the majority of Parliaments in the Commonwealth, the New South Wales Legislative Assembly has a debating chamber of rectangular shape with rows of benches facing each other along each of the longer sides. It has been argued by some that this type of set-up in the Chamber, by clearly delineating a side of the Chamber occupied by those members governing and those in opposition, reinforced the two party system.² Many Houses in Australia have replaced their benches with individual seats with desks for members.

A portrait and a memorial tablet have been erected within the Legislative Assembly Chamber. On 11 October 1859, the House agreed that a portrait of William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872) was to be permanently hung in the Chamber. The large portrait was painted in England around 1850 by Richard Buckner, and was paid for by money raised from public subscription. Whilst Wentworth was never a member of the Legislative Assembly³ it was deemed appropriate to hang the portrait in the Chamber "...in consideration of the eminent services...[as] one of the representatives of the City of Sydney, in obtaining Free Institutions for the Colony." Following a sometimes heated debate, an attempt was made to shelve the putting of the motion by moving the previous question.⁴ However, the previous question was not passed on the casting vote of the Speaker, and the House subsequently agreed to the substantive motion before the House, i.e. to place the portrait permanently in the Chamber.⁵

On 11 August 1915 the House agreed unanimously to a motion to erect a permanent memorial in the House to remember two serving members who died in the Great War of 1914 to 1918. Lieutenant-Colonel George Frederick Braund (Member for

¹ See *Parliamentary Government in NSW: A Brief Historical Sketch*, written by W. Kenneth Charlton, Second Clerk, Legislative Council Office, 1924, pp. 49-62. For further information on the history of the Parliament building see Reynolds, P.L., *Legislative Architecture in New South Wales*, 1976; and the Parliament of New South Wales History Bulletins, No. 1, *The Colours and Decorations of the Parliamentary Chambers*, No. 4, *The Architecture of Parliament House*, and No. 9, *The "Rum Hospital" and Parliament House*, 2002.

² See Wilding, Norman and Philip Laundy, *An Encyclopaedia of Parliament*, revised edition, 1961, p. 69.

³ Wentworth was an elected member of the pre-responsible Government Legislative Council from June 1843 to April 1854.

⁴ See section 16.2 of Part One for further information on the previous question procedure.

⁵ See VP 11/10/1859, p. 168.

Armidale) and Sergeant Edward Rennix Larkin (Member for Willoughby) were killed in action fighting at Gallipoli on 8 May and 10 June 1915, respectively. The memorial was unveiled by Speaker Meagher during a ceremony in the Assembly Chamber on 30 November 1915.⁶

The Speaker's Chair in the Legislative Assembly is quite unique in that it was hand carved by a sitting member of the House, Ninian Melville, in 1886. Ninian Melville was a cabinet maker and an undertaker who was elected to the Assembly as the Member for Northumberland in May 1880.⁷ Mr Melville held the seat until 1894 serving as Chairman of Committees from 1889 to 1894.⁸

The names of all previous Speakers, including the names of those members who have acted as the Speaker for a set time period in the Speaker's absence, are placed in small plaques which are located around the gallery level of the Chamber.

3.2.1 The colours of the Chambers

Traditionally in Westminster style Parliaments, such as New South Wales, the two prevailing colours used to decorate the Chamber are green for lower Houses and red for upper Houses.⁹ This tradition stems from the use of the colours red and green in the Houses of Parliament at Westminster.

The use of the red in upper Houses probably stems from the use by the Sovereign of red as a royal colour and as such was employed in the room where the Sovereign met his Court and nobles. The use of green in lower Houses is a little less clear but its use in the furnishings of the House was first authoritatively documented in an early travel book published in Lyon by Monconys in 1663 in which he observed that the House of Commons was set up as an amphitheatre with benches covered in green upholstery – "couverts de sarge verte".¹⁰ Records of the House of Commons in relation to maintenance and refurbishing of the Chamber for this time indicate that a payment was made in 1670 for "paynting green in oyle the end of the seates, and a Dorecase" and in 1672-73 that green woollen cloth was purchased for use in the Commons Chamber.¹¹ Whilst these official records indicate that green has been used in the House of Commons at least since the mid 17th century it is arguable that the green is symbolic and was used by the Commons much earlier than this. There are a number of different theories that have arisen about where the use of the colour green stems from.

The colours of the Palace of Westminster

It is argued that the colour adopted by the House of Commons in the United Kingdom stems from the use of the colour within the palace of Westminster rather than due to any specific symbolism. The earliest recorded meeting place of the House of Commons is the Painted Chamber of the House of Lords where the knights, citizens and burgesses assembled in 1341. It is argued that the majority of

⁶ See VP 11/08/1915, pp. 82-3 and VP 30/11/1915, p. 257.

⁷ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 5 1851 – 1890, K – Q, edited by Bede Nairn, Geoffrey Serle and Russel Ward, 1974, pp. 237-8.

⁸ *Legislative Assembly of New South Wales Parliamentary Record*, Vol. vii, 1824-2003.

⁹ The red and green style is used in the majority of Parliaments that have adopted the Westminster style of government but not all. For example, the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia is furnished in blue.

¹⁰ See the House of Commons Factsheet G10 entitled "House of Commons Green", dated September 2003, available from the website www.parliament.uk, accessed 10 October 2003.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the Palace of Westminster during this time was painted green, including the “Painted Chamber”.

The “Painted Chamber” had been constructed under the reign of Henry III (1216–1272) together with St Stephen’s Chapel, which was to become the permanent meeting place of the Commons from 1548 to 1834, and it is known that they were both furnished in the same colours. However, under Edward I (1272–1307) St Stephen’s Chapel was replaced and during the reign of Edward III (1327–1377) it was painted and redecorated and it is unknown whether green continued to be the predominant colour. Nevertheless it is theorised that the green in the House of Commons stems from this use of green in the Palace of Westminster.¹²

The cost of dyeing cloth

It has also been asserted that the use of the colour green by the House of Commons stems more from the cost of dyeing cloth for hangings than from its continued use throughout the Palace of Westminster. Dull green cloth was one of the cheapest colours to produce and it is argued that this is the main reason behind why the House of Commons is green in that the “Commons”, as the House of the commoner, had to be content with a more sober plumage than that of the House of Lords which was decorated in red. Red cloth was more expensive to produce as it was dyed with imported madder – a plant common to Holland – rather than with woad – a plant native to the United Kingdom – that was used to dye cloth green.¹³

Oak fields of Runnymede

Another theory is that the green is actually symbolic of the oak fields of Runnymede where the Magna Carta was signed in 1215 by King John or that it symbolises the village green and oak trees under which the commoners who later became members of the House of Commons gathered.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See information on the Bicameral Colours on the Tasmanian Parliament’s website at <http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/tpl/backq/Parliament.htm>, accessed 13 October 2003.