

PRIME FACTS

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS CENTRE

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Sir Edmund BARTON, PC, GCMG, QC

Prime Minister 1 January 1901 to 24 September 1903



- Edmund Barton was the 1st prime minister of the new Commonwealth of Australia. He was commissioned to form a Ministry on 31 December 1900, after the Act to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia received Royal Assent on 9 July. The Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed on 1 January 1901, and the first federal elections were held on 29-30 March. Barton's Protectionists won 31 seats in the House of Representatives compared to 28 for the Free Traders, 14 for Labor and two others. In the Senate, the Free Traders had 17 Senators, Labor 8, and Protectionists 11. As a result, Barton's government relied on Labor support.
- Prior to federation, Barton had a distinguished career in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly 1879-87, 1891-94, 1897-98; Legislative Council 1887-91, 1897-98; and served as Attorney-General 1891-93. He led the federation movement from 1891.
- Member of the Protectionist Party.
- Represented seat of Hunter (NSW) in the House of Representatives 1901-03. Minister for External Affairs 1901-03.
- Resigned on 23 September 1903. Deakin, also a Protectionist, replaced him the next day.

Main achievements (1891-1903)

- Attended the Federal Convention in Sydney in 1891 and took over leadership of the Federation movement from Henry Parkes. In 1892, Barton secured the support of the NSW Legislative Assembly for the Federal Convention's Constitution Bill and campaigned tirelessly over the next eight years for the federation of the Australian colonies. He attended the second Federal Convention in 1897. With the proposed federal constitution finally endorsed by referenda in five colonies in 1898, he led the Australian delegation to London in 1900 to ensure the Bill's passage through the British parliament.
- Immigration (Restriction) Act which brought about the White Australia policy.
- Audit Act, which brought about accountability in government spending.
- Acts Interpretation Act which set out the standards and conventions for drafting Bills.
- Customs and Excise Act, which produced the main source of revenue for the early Commonwealth.
- Established the High Court through the Judiciary Act 1903.



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Personal life

- Born at Glebe, Sydney, 18 January 1840. Died at Medlow Bath, Blue Mountains, NSW, 7 January 1920.
- Educated at Fort Street school, 1856-58; Sydney Grammar, 1859-65; and the University of Sydney, 1866-70. Became a barrister in 1871.
- Married Jane (Jeanie) Mason Ross at Newcastle, NSW, on 28 December 1877.

Life after politics

- High Court Judge 1903-20.

Character

- *Handsome with 'finely chiselled features', curling black hair starting to grey and 'beautiful black eyes that glowed with enthusiasm', Barton grew portly with age and good living, but still enjoyed fishing. Part of his charm was his generosity, even temper and ability to keep silent; his conversation rarely lacked humour or wit. An omnivorous reader, he loved the theatre – especially Shakespeare and the opera – and appreciated music and art. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 7, 1979, p 195)*

Did you know?

- The parliament Barton was elected to in 1901 included six future prime ministers as well as Isaac Isaacs who, 30 years later, became the first Australian-born Governor-General.
- Barton was awarded Japan's Order of the Rising Sun (First Class) in 1905.
- He was nicknamed 'Tosspot Toby' by the *Bulletin* magazine.

Sources

Rutledge, Martha, 'Barton, Sir Edmund (1849 - 1920)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 7, MUP, 1979, pp 194-200. On-line: <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au>

National Museum of Australia: <http://www.nma.gov.au>

National Archives of Australia: <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au>

Further reading

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