

PRIME FACTS

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS CENTRE

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Sir George Houstoun REID, PC, GCB, GCMG

Prime Minister 18 August 1904 to 5 July 1905



- George Reid became the 4th prime minister after the fall of John Watson's minority Labor government.
- He began his political career in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly 1880 representing the seat of East Sydney 1880-84. He held the seat again from October 1885 to July 1894. He moved to the new single member seat of Sydney-King 1894-1901 when he resigned to enter the federal parliament.
- Member of the Free Trade Party and Premier of NSW 1894-99. First federal opposition leader 1901-04 and 1905-08.
- Reid's term in office ended on the 5 July 1905 after losing Protectionist Party support. He was replaced by Alfred Deakin.

Main achievements (1895-1905)

- In NSW reformed the colony's economic arrangements and secured support for a new Crown Lands Act 1895 and Public Service Act 1895.
- Pre-1903: Key, if albeit misunderstood figure in the Federation movement and the establishment of the Australian Constitution. In 1895 Reid steered through the Australian Federation Enabling Act in NSW.
- Reid in a speech during the 1898 Federation referendum campaign told New South Wales voters he would personally support Federation and the Constitution Bill, but outlined reservations the voters should consider before taking any decision.
- He became known as 'Yes/No' Reid. Arguably the 'Yes/No' speech led to a better Constitution. Without his somewhat ambivalent support, NSW might not have come into the Commonwealth.
- He played a prominent role in the debate over the location of the national capital.
- 1904-1905: Established the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act (1904) this legislation established a court for settling industrial disputes. The act would have an enduring impact on Australian economic, industrial and social policy.
- As prime minister, advanced a plan which led to the first Commonwealth observance of Empire Day on 24 May 1905.



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Personal life

- Born on 25 February 1845 at Johnstone, Renfrewshire, Scotland. Died 12 September 1918 in London. Educated at Melbourne Academy (later Scotch College). Reid gained a post in the New South Wales Treasury progressing to chief branch clerk and by 1878, aged only 33, headed up the Attorney-General's Department.
- His controversial publication *Five Free Trade Essays* (1875) compared the effects of protective tariffs in Britain, the United States and Victoria. The book won Reid honorary membership of the Cobden Club in London.
- Reid's third work, *An Essay on NSW, Mother Colony of the Australias* (1876) was part of the colony's contribution to the United States Centennial Exposition.
- Admitted to the Bar 19 September 1879.
- In June 1909 made a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG).
- Married Flora Brumby in Wangaratta, Victoria on 5 November 1891.

Life after politics

- Appointed Australia's first High Commissioner to Great Britain 1910-16.
- Elected to the British House of Commons 1916-18
- Died in London 12 September 1918 and is buried in Putney Vale Cemetery, London.

Character

- His obese figure, droopy moustache, eye-glass and habit of dozing in public made him a constant target for caricature.
- Reid enjoyed public life and was described as a 'rambunctious, shambling mountain who was apt to disarm an opponent with the invitation to have a lolly, a supply of which he habitually carried in his copious pockets'. (Source: David Headon and John Williams eds), *Makers of Miracles: The Cast of the Federation Story*, MUP, Melbourne, 2000, p 56)
- He was a gifted orator, considered by many to be 'perhaps the best platform speaker in the Empire' both informative and amusing. Audiences would flock to his public speeches.

Did you know?

- Reid was the first and only Free Trade prime minister.
- His was the first funeral of an Australian prime minister, in 1918.
- After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Reid persuaded Lord Kitchener that the first Australian troops should be stationed and trained in Egypt and not England's wintry Salisbury Plain. Four months later, the troops were off to Gallipoli.
- Reid was the only Australian parliamentarian to serve in colonial, Commonwealth and British legislatures.

Sources

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