

PRIME FACTS

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS CENTRE

7

William Morris HUGHES, PC, CH, KC

Prime Minister 27 October 1915 to 9 February 1923



- Billy Hughes became the 7th prime minister after Andrew Fisher, leader of the Labor government, resigned from office due to ill health.
- Member of the Labour Electoral League 1891, Australian Socialist League 1892, Australian Labor Party 1901-16, Nationalist Party 1917-29, Australia Party 1930-31, United Australia Party 1931-45, Liberal Party of Australia 1945-52.
- Member of the House of Representatives for West Sydney 1901-17, Bendigo 1917-22, North Sydney 1922-49, and Bradfield 1949-52. Minister for External Affairs 1904; Attorney-General 1908-09, 1910-1913, 1914-21; Health and Repatriation 1934-37; External Affairs and Vice-President of Executive Council 1937-39; Attorney-General 1939-41; Minister for the Navy 1940-41, Minister for Industry 1939-41. Previously, Member of New South Wales Legislative Assembly for Lang 1894-1901.
- Hughes resigned as prime minister and was replaced by Stanley Bruce when the Country Party under Earle Page refused to serve in a coalition ministry with him.

Main achievements (1915-1944)

- A founder of the Labor Electoral League 1891, Australian Socialist League 1892, Nationalist Party 1917, Australia Party 1930, and United Australia Party 1931.
- Established Advisory Council for Science and Industry (forerunner to CSIRO) and Commonwealth Shipping Line 1916. Commonwealth Police Force 1917.
- Member of Imperial War Cabinet and Australia's representative at Versailles Peace Conference. Ensured Australia's interests represented during and immediately after First World War. Australia's delegate to League of Nations 1932.

Personal life

- Born 25 September 1862 in London. Died 28 October 1952 in Sydney.
- Son of a politically conservative Welsh carpenter who was a deacon of the Particular Baptist Church. Mother died when Hughes was seven. Lived with father's sister and educated in Llandudno. A pupil-teacher at St Stephen's School, Westminster from 1874.
- Joined volunteer battalion of Royal Fusiliers. Migrated 1884 to Queensland. Itinerant worker including rouseabout. Worked on coastal boat to Sydney and lived there in poverty. Found work as oven-maker's assistant.



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- Opened small shop and did odd jobs. Shop became meeting place for young reformers. Political debut as street-corner speaker for Balmain Single Tax League. Involved in debating societies 1892. President Waterside Workers Federation (Melbourne), Sydney Wharf Labourers Union, Trolley, Draymen and Carters Union, and Transport Workers Federation
- Studied law and admitted to Bar 1903. Contributed weekly articles to *Daily Telegraph* 1907-1911. Author of numerous books, including *The Case for Labor* 1910.
- Married Elizabeth Cutts, in 1886 in Sydney. Elizabeth died 1906. Married Mary Campbell 26 June, 1911 in Melbourne.

Life after politics

- A serving parliamentarian until his death in 1952.

Character

- *A shrewd tactician and effective speaker...a controversial figure all his life...To some a great statesman and patriot, to others he was a renegade and mountebank. He aroused extremes of admiration or hatred, but never indifference. Abrasive and ruthless, he could also be charming and amusing. Often mean, he could sometimes be very generous...His old opponent Lord Bruce said of him after his death: 'he had two qualities which are very rare and very important in a politician: he had imagination and he had courage'. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 9, MUP, 1983, p 400)*

Did you know?

- He held the record as longest serving parliamentarian (58 years) at the time of his death. On 29 October 1952 Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that 'this is the first day in the history of the Federal Parliament in which William Morris Hughes has not sat as a member'.
- As prime minister, he had more than 100 secretaries.
- He established the Commonwealth Police Force to combat disloyalty, after being struck by an egg in Warwick, Queensland.
- He suffered from a frail physique and severe deafness all his adult life.

Sources

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Further reading

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