

Joseph Aloysius LYONS, PC, CH

Prime Minister 6 January 1932 to 7 April 1939



- Joe Lyons became the 10th prime minister when the newly formed United Australia Party won the election of December 1931, defeating the Labor government of James Scullin.
- Member of the Workers Political League and the Australian Labor Party 1907-1931; United Australia Party, 1931-39.
- Member of the House of Representatives for Wilmot (Tasmania) 1929-39; Postmaster-General 1929-31; Minister for Works and Railways 1929-31; Treasurer 1932-35; Commerce, 1932; Repatriation 1935-36; Health 1935-36; Defence 1937. Prior to that, he was in the Tasmanian Legislative Assembly 1909-28, serving as Premier 1923-28.
- He died in office on 7 April 1939 and was replaced by Deputy Prime Minister Earle Page, of the Country Party.

Main achievements (1930-1939)

- As acting Treasurer (August 1930-January 1931) in the Scullin Labor government during the Depression, he argued for fiscal responsibility through reducing government spending, including wage cuts, but was opposed by the Treasurer, E.G. Theodore. Scullin endorsed Lyons' approach but retained Theodore as Treasurer and this contributed to Lyons' defection.
- With other Labor defectors, the Nationalist Party and citizens' movements such as the All for Australia League, Lyons and his allies founded the United Australia Party in 1931. The UAP was in turn a forerunner of the Liberal Party (1944).
- His orthodox fiscal management and conciliatory skills helped restore stability to government.
- Under the Financial Agreement Enforcement Act 1932, he recouped funds from the New South Wales government which had withheld interest payments on British loans.
- Established the Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932.
- Regulated conditions for air travel via the Carriage by Air Act 1935.
- Introduced environmental protection measures such as the Beaches, Fishing Grounds and Sea Routes Protection Act 1932 and the Whaling Act 1935.
- Amended the Financial Relief Act to ameliorate hardship and increase Commonwealth salaries and pensions.



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Personal life

- Born at Stanley, Tasmania, 15 September 1879. Died in Sydney 7 April 1939.
- Due to family financial crisis worked in odd jobs from age of nine, then aunts supported education. Educated Stanley state school, 1891-97, and Hobart Teacher Training College, 1907. Was a school teacher until entering State parliament in 1909.
- Married Enid Burnell at Wynyard, Tasmania, on 28 April 1915.

Life after politics

- Lyons was the first prime minister to die in office.

Character

- *Lyons was plump, of medium stature, upright in bearing, with blue eyes and an unruly mop of blond hair... His voice was a little high pitched... As prime minister he attended Mass each Sunday at Manuka parish church in Canberra. He was a moderate drinker, usually of Scotch. Despite his apparent simplicity and the conventional stereotype of 'Honest Joe', Lyons had an enigmatic and elusive personality. The New South Wales Premier, (Sir) Bertram Stevens, who admired and respected him, felt that there was a studied aspect to his populism... Charles Hawker [a Minister in Lyons' government 1932], who opposed his leadership, described his conservatism as that of 'the man with small savings, a home of [his] own'... The Labor newspaper, the World, [described him as] 'an eminently well-meaning dullard'. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 10, 1986, pp 188-89)*

Did you know?

- Prime Minister Lyons liked to be called 'Joe' and was nicknamed 'Honest Joe'.
- His parents were Irish immigrants.
- His father lost the family savings at the 1887 Melbourne Cup.
- He was the first Australian prime minister to die in office and the only Tasmanian to become prime minister so far.
- His wife, Dame Enid Lyons, was the first woman to become a member of the House of Representatives. She represented the Tasmanian seat of Darwin, 1943-51.

Sources

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

Further reading

Lyons, E. M., *Among the Carrion Crows*, Adelaide, 1972.

Lyons, Enid Muriel, *So We Take Comfort*, Heinemann, London, 1965.



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