

John Christian WATSON

Prime Minister 27 April to 17 August 1904



- Chris Watson became the 3rd Prime Minister when the government of Alfred Deakin, a Protectionist, fell due to Labor's refusal to support the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill.
- Member of Australian Labor Party 1900-16; Nationalist Party 1917-c1922.
- Member for Bland (NSW) in House of Representatives 1901-06 and for South Sydney 1906-10. Treasurer 1904. Prior to 1901 he was the Member for Young in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly 1894-1901.
- Watson was replaced as prime minister by George Reid, of the Free Trade Party, when Labor's amended Conciliation and Arbitration Bill failed to win support in parliament. Watson resigned after unsuccessfully seeking a double dissolution election.

Main achievements (1904)

- Headed the world's first national Labor government.
- The main achievement of Watson's prime ministership was the advancement of the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill, which was eventually passed in December 1904 under the Reid government.

Personal life

- Born 9 April 1867, Valparaiso, Chile, son of Johan Christian Tanck and his wife Martha. Became Watson when Martha remarried in 1869. Reared in New Zealand. Died 18 November, 1941, Sydney.
- Limited formal education in New Zealand. Worked as nipper on railway construction at age of ten and on father's farm. Became a compositor with New Zealand newspapers, active in the union, and migrated to Sydney after losing his job in 1886. Worked as compositor on Sydney newspapers and active in the Typographical Association of New South Wales. Delegate to the NSW Trades and Labor Council 1890. Foundation secretary of the West Sydney branch of the Labor Electoral League 1891. Elected president of NSW T&LC and chair of Labor party 1893.
- Married Ada Low, 27 November 1889, Sydney. Died 1921. Married Antonia Dowlan, 30 October 1925, Sydney.



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Life after politics

- Helped establish the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) and was its president 1920-41.
- Active in the Australian Workers Union 1910-16.
- Business ventures included Labor Papers Ltd., Yellow Cabs, and the Ampol petrol company.
- Advocated soldier settlement scheme 1915.
- Expelled from ALP in 1916 for supporting conscription. Helped form Nationalist Party 1917. Also became active in the Australian Industries Protection League.

Character

- *Watson was a 'born leader', proficient and gregarious, a man of 'unfailing courtesy, tact and good temper'. He was 'about 5 ft 10 ins (178 cm) tall, with sapphire-blue eyes, dark brown hair, moustache and budding beard: his athletic appearance and strength complemented his good looks. A rower and Rugby footballer, he was a great card-player, good at billiards and enjoyed a glass of beer... By 1900 Watson's beard had flowered into an elegant Vandyck. Looking 'like a Viking', he was [a] conspicuous [presence]... By 1920 Watson had shaved off his moustache and beard as his hair greyed. The depilation sapped his striking appearance: he looked kinder and more amiable; but his iron will surfaced on the rare occasions when gentle persuasion seemed likely to fail'. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 12, 1990, pp 400-405)*

Did you know?

- He was born in Chile and never became a British subject, so he was technically not eligible to sit in the Australian parliament.
- He was the first Labor prime minister in Australia – and in the world.
- He was the youngest prime minister, being aged 37 in 1904.
- A cricket fan, he was a trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground in the 1930s.

Sources

Nairn, Bede, 'Watson, John Christian (1867 - 1941)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 12, MUP, 1990, pp 400-405. www.adb.online.anu.edu.au

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

Further reading

McMullin, Ross, 'First in the World: Australia's Watson Labor Government', Papers on Parliament No. 44, Parliament House, Canberra, January 2006

Grassby, Al & Ordonez, Silvia, *The Man Time Forgot: The Life and Times of John Christian Watson, Australia's First Labor Prime Minister*, Pluto Press, 1999



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