

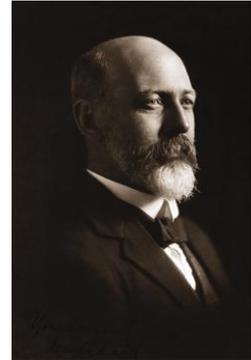
# PRIME FACTS

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS CENTRE

6

## Sir Joseph COOK, PC, GCMG

Prime Minister 24 June 1913 to 17 September 1914



- Joe Cook became the 6<sup>th</sup> prime minister when the Liberal Party won office by one seat, ousting the Labor government headed by Andrew Fisher. Initially a member of NSW Labor Party c1891-1894 and Free Trade Party 1905-10. Leader of the Liberal Party in 1913 and in 1916 led them into the new Nationalist Party.
- First elected to parliamentary office in the NSW Legislative Assembly, representing the seat of Hartley for the Labor Party, 1891-1901 (though as an 'independent Labor' representative from 1894). Held the seat of Parramatta in the new federal House of Representatives 1901-21. Minister for Defence 1909-10; Home Affairs 1913-14; Navy 1917-20 and Treasurer 1920-21.
- Ceased to be prime minister after a double dissolution election, the first in Australia's history, which returned a Labor government headed by Andrew Fisher.

### Main achievements (1909-1921)

- From 1909, when he succeeded George Reid as leader of the Free Trade Party, played an important role in bringing together anti-socialist political forces, which eventually formed the Liberal Party.
- As Minister for Defence, Cook's Defence Act 1909 established compulsory military training and a military college. He also concluded the agreement with Britain to establish the Royal Australian Navy. In 1918, Cook represented Australia at the Imperial War Conference and on the Imperial War Cabinet with Prime Minister Billy Hughes. In 1919 they were delegates to the Versailles Peace Conference.

### Personal life

- Born 7 December 1860 at Staffordshire, England. Died 30 July 1947, Sydney.
- Limited education, largely self-educated. After father's death in coal mining accident, became main breadwinner for family at age 13. Worked in mines. Joined the Primitive Methodists in his teens and became a lay preacher. Active in trade unions.
- Married Mary Turner at Wolstanton Primitive Methodist Chapel, 1885. Migrated to Lithgow, NSW, shortly after marriage. Mary's brother, also a miner, was already settled in Lithgow. Cook worked as a clerk in the Lithgow mines.



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## Life after politics

- Australia's High Commissioner in London, 1921-27.
- Chair of the 'Royal Commission on the Finances of South Australia, as Affected by Federation' 1928-29.

## Character

- *Joe Cook was an eminently successful politician and an able parliamentarian during an eventful period of Australian political history, because he was able to adapt to changing circumstances and because his sense of duty, as he understood it, triumphed clearly over adherence to early principles. Unfortunately for his career, he was most frequently in opposition and represented minority interests... A harsh critic might say that when in office Cook saved the taxpayers' money at the expense of the class from which he had risen, and when in opposition he was an unprincipled opportunist. A sympathetic admirer would stress that he was a self-made man who rose to the top with those very virtues of hard work, perseverance, self-improvement and a sense of duty which formed the central and uplifting message of the Primitive Methodists. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 8, 1981, p 99)*

## Did you know?

- Cook first worked in the Staffordshire coal mines at the age of nine but had to return to school when Britain's Elementary Education Act was passed in 1870.
- Cook was a founding member of the New South Wales Labor Party.
- Cook was prime minister when war was declared in August 1914. He said "When the Empire is at war, so is Australia".
- He was prime minister for only 15 months.
- Joseph Cook was knighted in 1918.

## Sources

Crowley, F. K., 'Cook, Sir Joseph (1860 - 1947)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 8, MUP, 1981, pp 96-99. On-line: [www.adb.online.anu.edu.au](http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au)

Rickard, John, 'Sir Joseph Cook', in Grattan, Michelle, (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2000, pp. 89-98

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## Further reading

Bebbington, G., *Pit Boy to Prime Minister: the Story of the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Cook, PC, CGMG*, University of Keele, UK, 1988

Murdoch, J. R. M., *Sir Joe: a Biographical Sketch of Sir Joseph Cook*, Silverdale Historical Publications, UK, 1979



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