

Sir Robert Gordon MENZIES, PC, KT, AK, CH, KC

Prime Minister 26 April 1939 to 29 August 1941; 19 December 1949 to 26 January 1966



- Robert Menzies became the 12th prime minister in 1939 when he replaced Earle Page, who was caretaker prime minister following the death of Joseph Lyons.
- Menzies resigned as prime minister on 28 August 1941. He was replaced by Arthur Fadden, the Country Party leader. Fadden's United Australia Party-Country Party coalition collapsed when two Independent MPs crossed the floor. Fadden was replaced by Labor's John Curtin on 7 October.
- In 1949 Menzies was prime minister again when his new Liberal Party defeated the Australian Labor Party led by Ben Chifley.
- Member of Nationalist Party; United Australia Party; Liberal Party of Australia 1944-78.
- Member House of Representatives for Kooyong 1934-66; Attorney-General 1934-39; Minister for Industry 1934-39; Treasurer 1939-40; Defence Co-ordination 1939-41; Trade and Customs 1940; Information 1940; External Affairs 1960-61; CSIRO 1961-62. Prior to that he was a Member of Victoria's Legislative Council 1928-29 and Legislative Assembly 1929-34. In 1932, he was State Attorney-General and Minister for Railways.
- In 1966 he resigned from parliament due to his age (71). He was replaced as prime minister by his long-time ally, Harold Holt.

Main achievements (1939-1966)

- Supported Britain in declaring war against Nazi Germany, 3 September 1939, and placed Australia on a war footing. Member of British War Cabinet, London, 1941.
- Decisive role in formation of the Liberal Party of Australia, 1944.
- Helped to defeat Chifley government's attempts to nationalise private banks and to extend war-time control over rents and prices by referendum, 1947-48.
- Royal Commission into the Petrov Affair, 1954.
- Oversaw the Colombo Plan 1950, Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) treaty 1951, and South East Asia Treaty Organization 1954. Commitment of troops to Korea 1950, Malayan Emergency 1950 and Vietnam 1964-65.
- Rapid development of Canberra as the national capital. Population grew from 28 000 in 1954 to 93 000 in 1966.
- Established the Australian Universities Commission in 1959, increased funding to universities and created new universities. Oversaw a period of economic boom 1950-66, marked by increasing trade, full employment, expansion of social services, hospitals and schools, and immigration.



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Personal life

- Born at Jeparit, Victoria, 20 December 1894. Died Melbourne, 15 May 1978.
- Educated at Humffray Street State School and Grenville College in Ballarat and Wesley College and University of Melbourne, where he studied Law. Admitted to the Bar 1918 and started a law practice. Won a High Court case for the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1920. Entered politics as an opponent of the Bruce Government's referendum on Commonwealth powers in 1926. A natural public speaker. Australia's youngest King's Counsel in 1929. A member of the 'Group of Six'. They were influential Melburnians who supported Joseph Lyons, the acting Treasurer in the Scullin Labor Government, when he defied his party's caucus in 1930 and refused to defer the repayment of a British loan. Menzies supported Lyons' policy of floating a conversion loan.
- Married Pattie Leckie, Melbourne, 27 September 1920.

Life after politics

- Lectured at the University of Virginia, USA, as a scholar-in-residence, 1967.
- Appointed Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, 1966, and was the first Knight of the Order of Australia, 1976.
- Wrote two memoirs, *Afternoon Light* 1967 and *The Measure of the Years* 1970.
- Chancellor of the University of Melbourne 1967-72.
- Suffered a severe stroke, 1971.

Character

- *Large framed and handsome, Menzies had a ready wit and superb command of language. His outward imperiousness did not simply betoken a sense of intellectual and political superiority. It also covered a certain shyness. Intimates knew a man of great good humour and kindness. Life for him was a gift to be enjoyed with gusto: he took pleasure in food and drink... and indulged himself in spectator sports, being a connoisseur of the art of cricket. After Alfred Deakin and before Gough Whitlam, Menzies was probably the most well-read prime minister Australia has had, though he was not given to parading his erudition... An intensely private man, he strictly separated personal matters, like his family life, from public affairs. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 15, 2000, p. 360)*

Did you know?

- Menzies is the longest serving prime minister (18 years, 5 months and 10 days in total).
- Regarded by admirers as Australia's greatest prime minister, the ultimate parliamentarian and shaper of the political system.
- Menzies' opponents nicknamed him 'Pig Iron' Bob because he supported the export of pig iron to Japan in 1938-39 after the Waterside Workers Federation refused to load it.
- He was a life long supporter of Carlton Football Club.

Sources

Martin, A. W., 'Menzies, Sir Robert Gordon (Bob) (1894 - 1978)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 15, MUP, 2000, pp 354-361. Online: www.adb.online.anu.edu.au

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

Further reading

Martin, A.W., *Robert Menzies: A Life. Volume 2, 1944-1978*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic, 1999



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