

### Sir John Greig LATHAM GCMG QC

Leader of the Opposition 20 November 1929 to 7 May 1931



- John Latham became the 9<sup>th</sup> Leader of the Opposition after assuming leadership of the Nationalist Party following the party's 1929 election loss.
- Member of the Independent Liberal Union 1922–1925, Nationalist Party 1925–1931, United Australia Party 1931–34.
- Member of the House of Representatives for Kooyong (VIC) 1922–34. Attorney-General 1925–29 and 1932–34. Minister for Industry 1928–29 and 1932–34, Minister for External Affairs 1932–34.
- Latham resigned as Leader of the Opposition when former Labor minister Joe Lyons merged his supporters with the Nationalists as the United Australia Party and took leadership of the new group. He then served as Deputy Leader of the UAP under Lyons.

#### As Opposition Leader

- Sought to close loopholes and give the federal government more power over industrial disputes.
- Introduced secret ballots into union elections through the *Arbitrations Act 1928*.
- Put pressure on the Scullin government to suspend Treasurer E.G. Theodore after allegations of corruption. Theodore later resigned.

#### Political life

- Toured South East Asia in 1934, the first Australian External Affairs minister to do so.
- Australia's first Minister to Japan 1940–1941, while still Chief Justice.

#### Personal life

- Born 26 August 1877 at Ascot Vale, Victoria. Died 25 July 1964 in Richmond, Victoria.
- Eldest of five children. Father was a Scottish-born tinsmith and both parents were devout Methodists.
- Attended George Street State School in Fitzroy, Scotch College and the University of Melbourne.
- Served as chief of naval intelligence during World War I as an honorary Lieutenant Commander.
- Married Eleanor Mary (Ella) Tobin 19 December 1907.
- Had two sons and one daughter. Both sons joined the defence force, one dying during World War II. Only his youngest son survived him.



MUSEUM  
OF AUSTRALIAN  
DEMOCRACY

OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE

## Life after politics

- Appointed as the 5<sup>th</sup> Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia 11 October 1935. Latham served as Chief Justice until 7 April 1952. Was known for a logical, literal and strict 'letter of the law' approach to constitutional issues.
- Chancellor of the University of Melbourne 1939-41. President of the Australian-American Association (1951-64), the Free Library Movement of Victoria (1937-48), the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (1954-61) and the Victorian Amateur Athletic Association (1943-56).
- Director of several companies.

## Character

*Even as an old man, Latham took enormous pride in his achievements and was always willing to talk about them. Those achievements were substantial. From humble origins he had attained the most senior post in his chosen profession and he had come very close to winning the highest political office. He was industrious, loyal and of unquestioned integrity. In the end, perhaps, he lacked the thrust required to succeed in politics and the creative spark that separates the distinguished jurist from the competent one. The intellectual certainty that Walter Murdoch had described in 1912 narrowed his imagination and stunted his sympathy with human frailty.*

Stuart Macintyre, 'Latham, Sir John Greig (1877-1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986.

## Did you know?

- Latham is no relation to his later successor as Opposition Leader of the same name, Mark Latham.
- Latham represented Australia in an international lacrosse match against a visiting Canadian team in 1908.
- Travelling to Europe in 1918 as a member of Prime Minister Billy Hughes' delegation, Latham played the role of counsel for the defendant in a shipboard farce performed by the prime ministerial party.

## Sources

Stuart Macintyre, 'Latham, Sir John Greig (1877-1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986, pp 2-6.

Cowen, Zelman, *Sir John Latham and Other Papers*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965.

Williams, J.R., *John Latham and the Conservative Recovery from Defeat*, Sydney, Australasian Political Studies Association, 1969.

## Further reading

D.J.E. Potts, *A Study of Three Nationalists in the Bruce-Page Government of 1923-1929* (M.A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1972).

John Latham papers (National Library of Australia); Cabinet papers (National Archives of Australia).



MUSEUM  
OF AUSTRALIAN  
DEMOCRACY

OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE