

Sir Robert Menzies and His Legacy

Educational resource presented by The
Robert Menzies Institute for educators

Early Life

Robert Menzies was born in the small town of Jeparit, Victoria on 20 December 1894. His father, James, who owned the Jeparit general store, was of Scottish background and the family of his mother, Kate, was originally from Cornwall, England. However, both of his parents were born in Australia, in Ballarat and Creswick, respectively. Robert was the fourth of five children born to James and Kate, having two older brothers and an older sister and one younger brother.

His family was not wealthy as his parents struggled to make the general store a successful business, but Robert Menzies' childhood was a typical one for someone growing up in a small country town during the Federation drought. He played sports, such as football and hockey, and swam in the nearby Wimmera River or Lake Hindmarsh where he would also fish and hunt for yabbies.



Source: Menzies' parents James and Kate (centre) outside the Jeparit General Store, date unknown. Image credit: Jeparit & District Historical Society.

Menzies grew up with parents who were both devout Christians and devoted to the ideals of public service. His father served on the Dimboola Shire Council (and was twice elected Shire president) and was a member for the district of Lowan in the Victorian Legislative Assembly from 1911 to 1920. Two of his uncles were also involved in politics, one serving in the Victorian parliament and one in the Australian parliament in the early 1900s. So, Robert had his father's and uncles' examples of public service in politics as an inspiration for his choices in later life.

Education

Menzies began his schooling in 1899 at the age of four and a half at Jeparit primary school, when the school was also only four and a half years old. Altogether there were thirty students attending the one-room school. In the early 20th century, most students only attended primary school but the Menzies family valued education. So, in 1906, Menzies and his sister, Belle, were sent to Ballarat to further their education, joining their two older brothers. The siblings all lived with their paternal grandmother. Menzies and his sister attended Humffray St State School where Menzies completed the equivalent of today's Year 7 and 8 education.

In 1907, at the age of thirteen Menzies was ranked first in the State-wide scholarship exam. This was a huge achievement as the scholarship paid for his secondary education – the equivalent of Years 9 to 10 – at any Victorian private school he wished to attend. This was important as in the early 20th century there was not a state-wide system of secondary schools as there is today.

Master Robert Menzies, son of Mr. Jas. Menzies, J.P., Jeparit, succeeded in coming out "top" of 1400 candidates in the recent State School Scholarship Examinations, scoring 672 marks out of the possible 900, and exceeding the next best scholar by 36 marks. The boy has only just turned 13 years of age, and "Punch" agrees that he gives promise of a successful scholastic career. For the past two years he has been tutored at Ballarat East school, which has been signally successful in its scholarship examination results for many years past.



ROBERT MENZIES.

Source: Article in Melbourne Punch, 6 February 1908 about Master Robert Menzies topping the Victorian State school examinations.

At first Menzies went to Grenville College, a small private school in Ballarat. He was there for two years - 1908 and 1909. But in 1910 the Menzies family moved to Melbourne as James Menzies was entering State politics. Menzies chose to go to Wesley College, interestingly against the advice of his father who wanted him to attend Scotch College. Menzies had mates who were going to Wesley so that is where he went.

Wesley College provided Menzies with a good education and in 1912 he won another scholarship of £40 (worth over \$5000 today) towards his university studies. In 1913, Menzies went on to study law at the University of Melbourne where he continued to win many more prizes and scholarships and graduated with first class honours in 1916.

Early Career

Menzies built up a successful law practice, focusing on Constitutional law. He was admitted to the Bar in 1918, thus becoming a barrister and in 1929 he was made a King's Counsel, the youngest in Victoria. This was a great achievement as King's Counsel is the highest level in the law that a barrister can reach and reflects experience, learning and a high regard amongst his fellow lawyers.

Following in his father's footsteps, Menzies entered politics at the State level in 1928 becoming the Nationalist Party of Australia's member for the Legislative Council (Upper House) seat of East Yarra, and then in the following year, 1929, he became the Legislative Assembly member for Nunawading. Menzies was as successful in politics as he was in his law practice. From the start of his term, he was immediately given a position in the Cabinet of then Premier, William McPherson. From 1932 to 1934 he held the positions of Attorney-General and Minister for Railways under Premier Stanley Argyle of the United Australia Party, and he was Acting Premier for three months in early 1934 when Argyle was too ill to govern.

Later, in 1934, Menzies was invited by the federal United Australia Party to contest the seat of Kooyong as the incumbent, or sitting member, did not want to continue in politics. To tempt Menzies to switch to federal politics, Prime Minister Joseph Lyons promised him the position of Attorney-General of Australia if the UAP (United Australia Party) won the election, and that Lyons, who was not well, would step down before the following election and allow Menzies to become Prime Minister. However, Lyons broke his promise to Menzies and did not step down as Prime Minister.



Source: Menzies, the young lawyer, in 1927.

Political Career

In his role as Federal Attorney-General - and thus a spokesperson for the government - Menzies became embroiled in some contentious issues which plagued the Lyons Government. These included the attempt to bar the entry of communist activist Egon Kisch into Australia and an disagreement with the trade unions over the export of pig-iron to Japan. Both issues cemented Menzies' reputation as being a strong and forthright leader and the union dispute gave him one of his nicknames: 'pig-iron Bob.'

In 1939, Menzies resigned from Cabinet in protest at the Lyons' government's failure to uphold its election promise of establishing a proper National Insurance scheme which would support Australians who were ill, unemployed, poor or in their old age. Whilst such a scheme was legislated as the National Health and Pensions Insurance Act 1938, in 1939 the funds for the scheme were diverted to National defence so it could not be implemented. As a result, when Joseph Lyons died in April 1939, the UAP were leaderless. However, Menzies stepped into the breach and was elected Leader of the UAP and thus Prime Minister of Australia.

Menzies' first term as Prime Minister was just over two years, a brief period when compared with his second term of sixteen years and thirty-eight days. In 1941, amidst dissension with the UAP's allies in the Country Party, Menzies resigned as Prime Minister, paving the way for the eventual ascension of John Curtin's Labor government.



source: Menzies poses with his first Cabinet in 1939, from the Museum of Australian Democracy.

Legacy

In 1944, Menzies spearheaded the formation of a new political party, the Liberal Party, which included the United Australian Party plus seventeen other non-Labor parties. Menzies' vision for the party was 'a true revival of liberal thought which will work for social justice and security, for national power and national progress, and for the full development of the individual citizen...' Despite an initial loss at the 1946 election, the Liberal party would go on to win the next six general elections. Menzies' second term, which began in 1949 and ended in 1966, was regarded as a period of economic growth, increased prosperity for Australians and great social change for Australia despite some periods of political turmoil.

Menzies and his government achieved much in his second term as Prime Minister and this reflected one of his core beliefs; that politics was a public service and that its primary purpose was to serve the interests of the community and improve the lives of the Australian people.

The list of achievements and improvements to Australian society by the Menzies government is a long one and included an overall improvement in the standard of living for Australians, a rapid rise in home ownership through the renegotiation of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, the Home Savings Grants Scheme and Housing Loans Insurance Corporation to help more Australians own their own home. The Menzies government also initiated many social security and medical benefits schemes, such as pensions and concessions for the needy and free medical treatment for pensioners. These changes formed the basis for many of the social and medical schemes today which help all Australians.

Menzies was also passionate about education and giving educational opportunities to those who otherwise might not be able to afford a higher education. He initiated the Commonwealth scholarship schemes for both secondary and tertiary education to help others just as he had been helped as a schoolboy. He also introduced State aid for non-government schools, tax deductions for school fees and other school expenses to help families send their children to school.

The Menzies government helped lead a mining boom which made Australia economically strong, and improved roads and transport which helped develop inland Australia. The Government supported and completed large scale engineering projects such as the Snowy Mountain hydro scheme. The government were staunch supporters of the immigration scheme which saw the arrival in Australia of one million immigrants over a ten-year period. All of this led to great prosperity for Australia and a top ten spot as a trading nation.



Source: Menzies at the opening of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme.



Source: Menzies in Japan.

On the world stage Menzies and his government also played a key role, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Menzies was instrumental in the creation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), the Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), as well as a commerce treaty with Japan and the Colombo Plan to assist Southeast Asian countries. The Menzies government also, in 1954, established Mawson Station in Antarctica for both scientific research and to protect Australia's claim to 42% of the Antarctic continent. It is now the longest running research station in Antarctica.

A full list of the accomplishments and legacy of Menzies and his government can be found at <https://www.robertmenziesinstitute.org.au/the-menzies-legacy>