

Andrew Fisher Biography

Andrew Fisher

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Contents

Andrew Fisher Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

Andrew Fisher (1862-1928) was an Australian labor leader. As the fourth prime minister of Australia, he pursued aims of greater social justice and initiated major projects in the new nation.

Andrew Fisher was born at Crosshouse, Ayrshire, Scotland, on Aug. 29, 1862. He was a miner before emigrating to Queensland in 1885. Working in the Burrum coal mines, he served as a union leader, meanwhile reading economics and social science. He became a pioneer member of the emerging Labor party, under whose banner he entered the Queensland Legislative Assembly in 1893.

In Australia's first federal elections (March 1901) Fisher won a seat in the House of Representatives. He won the deputy leadership of the party in 1904. He was minister for trade and customs in Labour's first federal ministry. When his leader, John Christian Watson, rebelled against caucus domination in 1908, Fisher was the party's almost unanimous choice to succeed him.

In November 1908 Fisher, a self-avowed Socialist, withdrew the support previously accorded Alfred Deakin and became prime minister and treasurer. Labour did not hold an outright majority, however, and the Fisher ministry lasted only 7 months before being ousted by a "fusion" of non-Labour forces.

The general election of April 1910 resulted in a Labour majority, opening the way for a spate of legislation. A federal land tax and compulsory military service were introduced, a government-owned bank (the Commonwealth Bank) was set up and private banks' notes withdrawn, maternity allowances were established as part of expanded social service benefits, and the transcontinental rail link was begun. After High Court rulings defined the limits of federal power in various fields important to Labour's objectives, Fisher in 1911 launched a referendum to amend the Constitution. It and a similar referendum in 1913 failed.

In the general election in mid-1913, Labour lost some seats and Fisher resigned, but a special poll in 1914 brought Fisher back to power. The third Fisher government fully supported Australia's participation in World War I and began immediate recruitment of an expeditionary force and deployment of the Royal Australian Navy. German possessions in the South Pacific area were taken over. Union pressure for social legislation was unabated, and as expectations for a quick end to the war faded, dissatisfaction grew. Amid signs of an impending party split Fisher resigned in October 1915 to become Australian high commissioner in London (1916-1920). He died in London on Oct. 22, 1928.