George Houstoun Reid

Prime Minister of Australia 1904–05

Born in Scotland in 1845, George Reid migrated to Australia with his family in 1852. Pursuing a legal career, Reid was admitted to the Bar in 1879. The following year he entered the New South Wales parliament, where he was instrumental in creating the Free Trade party. In 1894, Reid's Free Traders won an effective majority in the New South Wales state parliament, and Reid became Premier and Treasurer. As a senior colonial politician of this period, Reid was a key figure in the federation movement. Reid entered federal parliament in 1901 as Member for East Sydney, becoming Leader of the Opposition. A conservative politician, he favoured Free Trade in state and federal politics.

It was on the collapse of the Watson Labor government on 18 August 1904 that Reid became Prime Minister. He governed in a coalition with conservative Protectionist, Allan McLean, and his followers. Reid also served as Minister for External Affairs. Alfred Deakin refused to join the coalition, leaving Reid's government a majority of one in the House of Representatives and outnumbered in the Senate. The Reid government's only substantial achievement was in industrial relations with the passage of the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1904. A censure motion proposed by Deakin brought the Reid–McLean government down on 5 July 1905. It had been in power for less than eleven months. Reid was the only Free Trade Prime Minister, and remained the leader of that party until 1908.

In December 1909, George Reid resigned from parliament and was appointed Australia's first High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He sought an extension of his term, but was replaced by another former Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, in January 1916. On 10 January 1916, Reid was elected to the British House of Commons. He died in London on 12 September 1918.

Research guide – Our First Six: Guide to the Archives of Australia's Prime Ministers

National Archives holdings relating to George Reid

The National Archives holds a range of records relating to George Reid both as a federation figure and his years in the Commonwealth parliament.

In the table below, reference numbers direct you to the item or series in RecordSearch, the National Archives database. There you can find more information. In many cases you can view entire digitised records. The information will appear in a new browser window.

Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Autographed photograph of the Governor-General and Reid ministry	1904	A461, H370/1/7
Fourth Commonwealth ministry (Reid ministry) – correspondence and historical notes	1904–05	A5447, 8
Agreement between the PM and the Governor-General about occupancy of Government Houses in Sydney and Melbourne	1905	A1, 1905/2828
Silhouette of the Rt Hon. G H Reid, MHR	1907	A1861, 71
Deaths – Sir George Reid	1907–23	A2910, 416/1/1
Sir George Reid – appointment as High Commissioner – London	1910–15	A1, 1915/7247
Audit query on travelling expenses for Sir George Reid during his trip to Glasgow	1910	A63, A1910/7395
Appointment of Sir George Reid as High Commissioner, January 1910	1910	A2911, 1/1909
Admiral Fisher's letters to Sir George Reid, on the Commonwealth government's invitation to visit Australia	1910	A5954, 1207/6
Sir George Reid	1914–15	A1, 1915/17678
Honours – GCB, KCB	1915	A2923, H2
Condolences – death of Sir G H Reid	1918–19	A2, 1919/1834
Portrait of Sir George Reid	1927	A6006, 1927/02/03