

## Sir John McEWEN, PC, GCMG, CH

Prime Minister 19 December 1967 to 10 January 1968



- McEwen became the 18<sup>th</sup> prime minister after serving as leader of the Country Party in the coalition government since 1958. He assumed a caretaker role after the disappearance of Harold Holt.
- Member of the Country Party of Australia.
- Member of the House of Representatives 1934-1971. Held seat of Echuca 1934-37, Indi 1937-49 and Murray 1949-71. Joined parliamentary Country Party 1934-1971. Minister of the Interior 1937-39, External Affairs 1940, Air and Civil Aviation in 1940-41, Commerce and Agriculture 1949-56, Trade 1956-63, Trade and Industry 1963-71.
- McEwen ceased to be prime minister when Liberal Party senator, John Gorton, won a ballot of Liberal parliamentarians on 9 January 1968.

### Main achievements (1937-1968)

- Minister in the Cabinets of five heads of government.
- Member of Australian Advisory War Council 1940-1945.
- Member of Australia's delegation to conference to establish United Nations 1945.
- Held key trade and commerce portfolios for 20 years. Developed influential international networks in business and government.
- Led numerous trade delegations including negotiation of controversial Australia-Japan trade agreement 1957, six years after peace treaty signed with Japan. Linked Australia's trade to its capacity to fight Communism during Vietnam War.

### Personal life

- Born 29 March 1900 in Chiltern, Victoria. Died 20 November 1980 in Toorak, Melbourne.
- Raised by grandmother in Wangaratta then Dandenong after the death of mother in 1901 and father in 1907. Educated at Wangaratta state school 1907-1913.
- Left school at 13 to work at pharmaceutical company. Family moved to Melbourne 1914. Studied at night school, joined Crown Solicitor's Office. At 18 enlisted in 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Imperial Force. Called up just before Armistice declared (1918).
- Worked as farmhand. Joined Victorian Farmers Union 1919. Qualified to buy farm under soldier-settler scheme at Tongala, Victoria, and worked as labourer to raise capital.
- Married Anne McLeod on 21 September 1921 at Tongala, Victoria. Married Mary Byrne on 26 July 1968 after the death of his first wife of 45 years.
- Sold dairy farm in 1924 and bought 'Chilgala' station. First chairman of Stanhope Dairy Cooperative 1923-1924. Joined Freemasons. Active in local rural community rural politics.



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## Life after politics

- Remained leader of the Country Party until his resignation from parliament in 1971.
- Sold 'Chilgala' and moved to Toorak in 1975. Worked as a consultant but distanced himself from politics.

## Character

- Frugal, hardworking, determined, loyal. Various described as 'strong...hard, tough and demanding... a commanding presence, a personality of great force... a powerful negotiator. Despite an 'austere demeanour', he also had 'great personal warmth and accessibility' (*Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, Volume 120, pp 28-29*)
- *His formidable public persona was complemented by the sombre suits he wore. Grimly resolute and sometimes choleric in temper, he was nicknamed 'Black Jack'...Although awesome in presence and reputation, McEwen was generally accessible and, on occasions, jovial...mingled determination with a milder, questing quality...an adept conversationalist who moved about the electorate with calm and authority, untiring in pursuing relevant facts, but willing to listen, consult, joke, and yarn at length. A fluent, forceful and often passionate speaker...* (Source: *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 15, pp 205-208*).

## Did you know?

- Began farming as a soldier-settler, building a modest allotment into a prosperous farming enterprise. Later led 'no' campaign in Curtin's referendum on repatriation and post war reconstruction, arguing for new policies rather than Constitutional change to assist returned soldiers.
- At 16 he worked in the Crown Solicitor's office under Frederick Whitlam, father of Gough Whitlam.
- He was elected to the federal parliament in 1934, the same year as Robert Menzies, and enjoyed a 16-year coalition partnership with Menzies.
- He contested 14 federal elections between 1934 and 1969, and acted as prime minister on 10 occasions during Menzies' absence overseas.
- As member of Advisory War Council, he strongly opposed enlistment of women during the Second World War.
- He was one of three Australian prime ministers to be awarded Japan's Order of the Rising Sun First Class 1973.

## Sources

Golding, Peter, 'Sir John McEwen (19 December 1967-10 January 1968)', in Michelle Grattan (ed), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland, Sydney, 2000, pp 286-296

Lloyd, C.J., 'McEwen, Sir John (1900-1980)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 15*, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp 205-208. Online: [www.adb.online.anu.edu.au](http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au)

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

## Further reading

Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, First Session of the Thirty-Second Parliament (first period), 25 November to 4 December 1980, Volume 120*, The Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1980, pp 26-37



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