

# Joseph and Enid Lyons

*A remarkable political partnership.*



**Joseph Aloysius Lyons** was born at Stanley in north-western Tasmania on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1879. He was one of the eight children of Irish immigrants Ellen and Michael Lyons. In 1887 the family were plunged into poverty after Joe's father made an unfortunate Melbourne Cup wager and as a result lost the family butchery and bakery business.

This saw Joe, at age nine, working at odd jobs as well as attending the convent school at Ulverstone. In 1891, when he was 12 years old, his aunts paid his upkeep so he could attend the state school at Stanley. At 17, he qualified as a teacher, his first teaching posts being tiny country schools in north-western Tasmania. In 1905, he transferred to Smithton as head teacher.



**Joseph Aloysius Lyons was born in this tiny cottage in Stanley in 1879.**

There Lyons started the Duck River branch of the Workers Political League and a local debating society. His membership of the League brought a sharp reproof from the Education Department. He responded by resigning and standing for State Parliament. In 1909 Lyons won the seat of Wilmot at the Tasmanian elections, beginning at age thirty a nineteen year term in State Parliament which was to include five as Premier. His ministry was the first to have a clear Labor majority in Tasmania and to show a surplus in the State's shaky finances.

In 1912 he was elected president of the state ALP branch and became deputy leader of the parliamentary ALP in 1914... For the next two years he served as Treasurer, Minister for Education and Minister for Railways in John Earle's ALP government, during which period he reformed the Education Department, abolished school fees, improved teachers' conditions and pay, and had Tasmania's first high schools built in Hobart and Launceston. Meanwhile The Easter Uprising in Dublin in 1916 reawakened his sense of Irish nationalism and he became vice-president of the Hobart United Irish League.

Among the many people he knew through the Workers Political League, the debating societies and Labor discussion groups, was Eliza Burrell. In June 1913, she introduced Joe to her daughter Enid, a 17 year-old trainee teacher. Their wedding on 28 April 1915 was the start of perhaps the best-known marriage in Australian politics, although it could well never have happened. Uneasy at the disparity in their ages, Enid's father commented that "had it not been Mr Lyons" he would have refused his consent. He need not have worried – the success of the partnership was destined to be a matter of political legend!

Like others in the Labor Party whose background was Irish, Lyons supported Home Rule. In 1916 he was the vice-president of the Hobart United Irish League. He was also an opponent of conscription. On 2 November 1916, he became leader of the state parliamentary party and Premier of Tasmania. After the Labor government was defeated in the Tasmanian elections of May 1919, Lyons was Leader of the Opposition. In December he stood unsuccessfully for the House of Representatives seat of Darwin, the west coast electorate held by King O'Malley until 1917, when O'Malley lost to a pro-conscription Nationalist candidate.

Lyons once again became Premier of Tasmania on 25 October 1923 when the Nationalist government of Walter Lee fell after several Nationalists deserted the party. Lyons was appointed Premier at the head of a minority ALP government. As well as being Premier he took the Treasury and Railways portfolios. He retained the role of Treasurer for the five and a half years he was Premier.

Lyons quit state politics to enter the federal sphere at the suggestion of the federal parliamentary ALP leader, J.H. Scullin. He contested the federal seat of Wilmot for the ALP at the general election on 12 October 1929, and won comfortably, going on to hold the seat through the next three general elections: However, he did not warm to Canberra-style politics and tended to keep a low profile. Nevertheless he showed his financial acumen as Acting Treasurer, by floating a 25 million pound conversion loan despite the Depression.

Lyons joined Scullin's Cabinet as Postmaster-General and Minister for Works and Railways. When Treasurer E.G. Theodore was stood down from Cabinet in August 1930, Lyons became acting Treasurer and together with acting Prime Minister James Fenton negotiated the difficult path of the implementation of strategies for combating the Depression.

In October 1930 Lyons presented a plan of moderate action, drawn up by Treasury, to the ALP Caucus. It was for a balanced budget and a reduction in government expenditure, including reduced salaries for public servants. It also featured stabilisation of internal prices through monetary controls, reduced interest rates and provision of credit for industry to stimulate production.

Caucus rejected his plan in favour of more radical, inflationary proposals for creating credit and expanding the deficit. Caucus then went even further, against the advice of both Lyons and Theodore, to defer repayment of an overseas loan due on 15 December. Lyons, threatened to resign, refused to defer the repayment, and was supported via cables from Scullin, who was overseas at the time attending a Conference in London..

Lyons' difficulties with the ALP Caucus continued through December 1930-January 1931. Caucus accused him of collaborating with Opposition Leader, J.G. Latham,

who was suggesting a cross-party government of national unity. When Scullin returned to Australia on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1931, he affirmed Lyons' policies as Acting Treasurer, but ignored his wish to become Treasurer. Instead, he had Theodore reinstated as Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister.

Lyons resigned in protest on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1931. However, resigning from Scullin's ministry was far from a leap into the wilderness. Through their obstinacy in confronting Caucus over the issue of responsible economic management, Lyons and Fenton had attracted a set of prominent conservative supporters. Known as "the Group", these conservatives included Robert Menzies.

Encouraged by Melbourne business interests Lyons became the principal figure in a new body, the "All For Australia League", which consisted of ALP defectors and dissident Nationalists. In March-May 1931 the League worked to establish a new party, the United Australia Party (UAP), from this merger. Lyons was elected to the UAP leadership unopposed and announced the move in parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1931, to the accompaniment of rowdy and vehement denunciation from his former ALP comrades.

When the Lang Labor dissidents moved against Scullin late in the parliamentary session, Lyons joined them in securing the fall of the government, with Lyons leading the UAP to a decisive victory at the general election of 19<sup>th</sup> December 1931. He assumed the Prime Ministership on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1932 and moved his wife and family into the Lodge. In less than a year, Joseph Lyons had transformed himself from dissident and defector to Prime Minister

Lyons' first major task as Prime Minister was to deal with action by J.T. Lang's New South Wales government - it had decided to withhold interest payments on British loans, in defiance of the federal government. To maintain faith with the bond holders, Lyons' government paid the interest, then passed the Financial Agreement Enforcement Act to recoup the moneys by appropriating New South Wales funds. The problem was resolved on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1932 when the Governor of New South Wales, Philip Game, dismissed Lang.

Lyons came to power while Australia was still in the toils of the Depression and he held power during those fateful years of the 1930s when the world economies slowly recovered but the democracies had to face the emerging threat of the German, Italian and Japanese military dictatorships. Lyons, as an Irish Catholic, had been an anti-conscription activist during the First World War and, like any sensible man; he hated the waste and horror of war. But it fell to him, as Prime Minister, to prepare Australia for another war at a time when the armed forces had been allowed to shrink to mere skeletons. His government began to re-equip the Army, double voluntary recruitment and strengthen the RAAF and the RAN. It also broadened the industrial base essential for a war effort by opening the first Commonwealth Aircraft Factory and planning munitions works and shipyards.

With the political and financial crises of 1931-32 behind him, Lyons settled into his role as head of the UAP government. His government implemented the Premiers' Plan for handling the depression which the former Scullin ALP government had devised. He led the UAP to victory at the general elections of 1934 and 1937. At the latter election the UAP lost its absolute majority, and was forced to enter into coalition with the Country Party, whose leader, Earle Page, became Deputy Prime Minister.

Lyons' chief success as Prime Minister was to restore stability to the government following the onset of the Great Depression and the turbulent events surrounding the ALP split of 1931. He also succeeded in holding the UAP together for seven years. As Prime Minister he had considerable popular appeal, his reputation as a 'family man' helping him out here. (The Lyons family was the first to use the Prime Minister's Lodge in Canberra as a family home.) By late 1938-early 1939, Lyons, now ailing, began losing control of the UAP as several potential challenges to his leadership emerged. To restore unity, he tried to persuade S.M. Bruce, the former Nationalist Prime Minister, to return to parliament and assume the UAP leadership. However, these negotiations broke down. Among Lyons' chief critics was R.G. Menzies, his Attorney-General, Minister for Industry and UAP deputy leader, who resigned these positions on 20 March 1939 in protest at the government's failure to implement its national insurance scheme.



**The Lyons family arrives at The Lodge in 1938.**

**National Library of Australia**

Lyons' health began to fail as he came under increasing pressure from tensions within the UAP, from a revitalised ALP (now under John Curtin's leadership) and from criticism of Australia's defence capabilities as a Second World War became more likely. The coalition forced him into consensus politics and inevitably he could not please everyone. Menzies described him as "the best parliamentarian I've ever known" but others, seeking their own advantage, disliked him. As the shadows of impending war darkened, he became more decisive and determined, but letters to his wife during his final year in government reveal the unhappiness of a man under many conflicting pressures. No doubt they contributed to his fatal heart attack in April 1939.

On 7 April 1939, Joseph Lyons became the first Prime Minister to die in office. He had driven from The Lodge in Canberra to Sydney, en route to his home in Tasmania for Easter. However he suffered a heart attack, dying in hospital in Sydney, on Good Friday. His body lay in State in St. Mary's Cathedral, where a Requiem Mass was held. The coffin was then taken in procession to the harbour where an Australian Navy ship was waiting to take it to Devonport, Tasmania for burial.

In an address delivered in 2005 in which he reflected on his political experiences, the Rt Hon D J (Doug) Anthony said;

*“I have a warm memory of Joe Lyons. He was a most courteous and kindly person. And I had a great admiration for his wife, Enid Lyons. She was a tremendous help to him as well as having eleven children! They certainly filled the new Lodge in those days.”*



**The Lyons family at The Lodge in 1938.  
National Library of Australia.**

We now move on to the other half of the partnership.

**Enid Muriel Lyons** was fundamentally a woman in touch with human values, with the real world. In the early years of her marriage and despite often crippling pain (her pelvis had been fractured during the birth of one of her children) and the heavy demands of motherhood, Enid carried on from election to election, moving the family from home to home, packing and unpacking. Even her honeymoon was spent at a Premiers' Conference.

Joe and Enid were a partnership in every sense of the word—in marriage and in politics. Enid described herself as ‘Joe’s public relations man’, and spent much of her time as a Prime Ministerial wife travelling the country campaigning for him. She spoke a minimum of three times a week, discussing issues that related to women and families. Their lives, she admitted, were “lived at a killing pace”.

Enid had delivered her first political speech in 1920, accompanied Joseph to ALP conferences, and in 1925, when the mother of six young children, stood as a Labor candidate for the seat of Denison, losing by only 60 votes. By then, however, she enjoyed an established public role and was her husband's closest political ally, although she always denied the general assumption that she was privy to all Joseph's political decisions and prompter of his political actions. 'Neither my public activities, my family responsibilities nor the state of my health would have permitted it.' she said.

Those were indeed the three main elements of Enid's life while Joe was Prime Minister. She was the first prime minister's wife to engage directly in a public political career. Although suffering chronic pain and frequent illness, she campaigned actively on his behalf, including in the 1931 election which brought him to office as Prime Minister. She gave public speeches and broadcasts, both when travelling with him and independently, on such topics as women's rights, buying Australian goods, and defence.



**Enid speaking to a group of women**

Enid accompanied Joseph to the Royal Jubilee celebrations for King George V and Queen Mary in England in 1935 and to the Coronation of King George VI in 1937. Typically, on her return, when describing her experiences to an "enthralled" audience of nearly 3,000 people in the Melbourne Town Hall, she compared the lack of opportunity for the mass of people in England with Australia, praised local efforts to



wipe out slums, and urged other action to eradicate “the worst of the best” and make Australia a land of achievement. Her compassionate, confident and practical personality also found expression in her response to direct requests for help, her wifely role as sympathetic conduit to the Prime Minister being fully called on in the dire circumstances facing many unemployed families. Often separated from her family and often ill, tired and in pain Enid did not always enjoy her public responsibilities, but her later political prominence owed much to the recognition of her earlier political influence. As for family life, its heart was ‘Home Hill’ built for Joseph and Enid Lyons in 1916 in Devonport, Tasmania. Sometimes the Lyons children lived in The Lodge in Canberra – they were the first children to do so – and Joseph combined prime ministership with childcare while Enid was in hospital. However, for most of the time, the older children went to boarding schools. Enid maintained that the longest continuous period she spent at The Lodge was five weeks,



**“Home Hill”, now under the protection of the Tasmanian Branch of the National Trust**

Joe’s death left Enid a widow and a single mother with 11 children. She was devastated and suffered a breakdown. They were, she said, “black days”. However, ever-resilient, she eventually set out on her own political career. In 1942 she won the seat of Darwin, (now called Braddon) in Tasmania in the 1943 election, the bleakest year for the conservative side of politics in Australia. The primary vote for the conservatives, for the UAP and the Country Party was a mere 33 per cent. It was a devastating election; she was the one bright hope for the non-Labor forces in the Federal Parliament. She was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives

and, jointly with Dorothy Tangney (WA), the first of women elected to the Australian Parliament. Her concerns included:

- A belief in the right of women to a place in government
- Issues concerning families, particularly those affecting housewives and mothers
- Improvement of maternity care
- Raising the widow's pension
- Elimination of discrimination in employment

In the new Liberal Country Party Ministry under Menzies, she was appointed vice-president of the Executive Council, making her the first woman to enter a federal cabinet. During this time:

- She was responsible for the extension of child endowment in 1950 and the raising of the allowances paid to returned servicewomen.
- She lobbied for women's right to retain nationality and citizenship on marriage to foreigners (passed 1948).

Enid was one of the first members of the newly formed Liberal Party. She could perhaps be called the founding mother of that Party, just as Robert Menzies is known as its founding father. Speaking at the 2008 launch of Ann Henderson's biography *Enid Lyons: Leading Lady to a Nation*, the current Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull said that the equal status of women in the Liberal Part today "is owed to the leading role that Enid Lyons played in its foundation." Enid Lyons could, he said, be called "a political super star"

Certainly Enid had an enormous fan club; she was a very popular newspaper and magazine columnist and wrote right through her life, not just to promote her political values and ideals but in order to keep the household together. It was a considerable financial struggle, this was a family that had enormous financial demands with so many children but very little in way of income beyond, initially Joe's parliamentary salary, then Enid's, and of course what she could generate from journalism.

She also struck a great blow, as had Joe Lyons, in the defeat of sectarianism in Australia. They were both Catholics and of course leading Catholics on the

conservative side of politics. At that time there was to a large degree a sectarian divide in politics in Australia and there were few Catholics on the conservative side of politics. That is of course well and truly a thing of the past and fortunately so.

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Enid was the first woman in to join Cabinet when she was appointed Vice-President of the Executive Council in the Menzies Government in 1949. Her achievements in office included the extension of child endowment in 1950, increases to the allowances paid to returned servicewomen, and ensuring that women who married foreigners retained their nationality and citizenship. Increasing ill health forced her retirement from politics in 1951.

In retirement her health improved. She continued to be active in public life, working as a newspaper columnist, chairing the Jubilee Women's Convention (1951) and as a Member of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (1951-62). She was a longstanding member of the Victoria League (1913-81), the Liberal Party (1944-1981), the Housewives Association and the Country Women's League. She published two autobiographical volumes entitled *So We Take Comfort* (1965) and *Among the Carrion Crows* (1972). In 1980, she was awarded the Dame of the Order of Australia. "Home Hill" is now managed by the National Trust and contains many mementos of Enid's political life.

Dame Enid Lyons, affectionately known as "Australia's Greatest Mother.", died in Ulverstone on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1981 and is buried beside her husband in Devon ale, Tasmania

## Recommended Reading

Kate White, *Political Love Story: Joe and Enid Lyons* (1987)

Ann Henderson, *Enid Lyons: Leading Lady to a Nation* (2008)

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