



Suggestion 58

English Speaking Union

3 pages

SUBMISSION TO NAME A COMMONWEALTH ELECTORATE IN HONOUR OF WILLIAM WATT

My name is Robert Furlan. I am making this submission on behalf of the English-Speaking Union (Victoria Branch). I am the President of the Victoria Branch.

This submission proposes that the new Commonwealth electoral division to be established in Victoria as an outcome of the redistribution of electoral boundaries be named in recognition of William Alexander Watt.

William Watt – A Great Victorian and an Outstanding Australian

William Watt was an outstanding contributor to Australian political life and worked vigorously for the benefit and well-being of Victorians and Australians over a span of more than three decades from the 1890s to the 1920s.



William Watt, Victorian Treasurer and Premier, Commonwealth Treasurer and Speaker of the Commonwealth House of Representatives

In a review of then eminent living Australians, *The Age* newspaper in 1938 described William Watt as “one of Australia’s ablest statesmen” and “one of this country’s greatest orators, a masterly debater and a State financier of exceptional skill (who) dominated Victorian parliamentary life for a number of years and later attained front rank in Federal politics.”¹

Chris Bowen’s recent study *The Money Men* nominates William Watt as one of Australia’s twelve most notable Commonwealth Treasurers since Federation.²

William Watt was active in Australian life as:

- a prominent supporter of Australian Federation;
- the youngest Cabinet minister in the Victorian colonial Parliament;
- a reformist Victorian Treasurer;
- Victorian Premier from 1912 to 1914;

¹ *The Age* (Melbourne, Victoria) 9 April 1938 p.3

² Chris Bowen *The Money Men* Melbourne University Press 2015

- Commonwealth Treasurer from 1918 to 1920;
- Acting Prime Minister of Australia in 1918-1919.;
- Speaker of the Commonwealth House of Representatives from 1923 to 1926.

William Watt was also President of the English –Speaking Union Victoria Branch from 1921 to 1925.

William Watt's Background

William Watt was born in the rural Victorian town of Barfold, located near Kyneton, Victoria in 1871. He was the eleventh born child of Scottish immigrant James Watt and Irish-born Jane Douglas.

Watt was educated at the Errol Street State School in North Melbourne, leaving school at fourteen to become the family breadwinner. He later studied accountancy at night school at the Working Men's College in Melbourne (now the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology).

In the late 1880s, Watt joined the Australian Natives Association (ANA) and honed his public speaking skills at the association's debates and lectures.

William Watt's Contribution to Australian Federation

As a member of the ANA and as vice-president of the Australasian Federation League of Victoria, Watt was a prominent advocate of Australian Federation. His advocacy of a unified Australian Federation at the ANA's conference in Bendigo in 1898 swayed critical popular support for Federation.

Upon his election to the Victorian Parliament in 1897, Watt supported Alfred Deakin in his historic efforts to secure a federation of all Australian States. As part of the Young Australia group, Watt was a forceful and persuasive advocate of Federation. He was able to personally witness the achievement of his goal with the proclamation of Australian Federation in Melbourne in January 1901.

William Watt's Contribution to Victoria

At the age of twenty-eight, William Watt was appointed to the Cabinet position of Postmaster-General in the Victorian Parliament in 1899, becoming reportedly the youngest Cabinet minister in the British Empire.³

From 1909 until 1914, as Victorian Treasurer Watt initiated financial measures to support regional development in Victoria. He also co-operated with his Commonwealth counterpart to establish Commonwealth-State per capita revenue agreements.

In 1912, he became Premier of Victoria. In this capacity, he introduced workers compensation legislation, state support for hospitals, electrification of railways and an extensive State-wide irrigation system. He also introduced the system of preferential voting in Victorian elections, an initiative which he later pursued at the Commonwealth level.

During his period as Victorian Treasurer and Premier, William Watt was the member for Essendon, an electorate previously represented by Alfred Deakin.

³ John Anderson and Geoffrey Serle, 'Watt, William Alexander (1871–1946)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/watt-william-alexander-9011/text15869>, published first in hardcopy 1990, accessed online 14 October 2020.

William Watt's Contribution to Australia

As Victorian Premier, William Watt co-operated with the Premier of New South Wales, William Holman, to amalgamate their respective State immigration offices in Britain. He then supported the Commonwealth Government assuming responsibility for immigration to Australia.

In 1914, Watt resigned as Victorian Premier and contested the Commonwealth elections, winning the Commonwealth seat of Balaclava, for which he remained the sitting member until 1929.

Watt was commissioned as Commonwealth Treasurer as part of W M Hughes' Government in March 1918.

As Treasurer in this difficult wartime period, Watt had to manage the severe economic impact of the First World War on Australians. This required interventionist economic measures including imposing price controls and raising revenue through increased taxation. In the immediate post-war period, Watt secured favourable loans for the Commonwealth and successfully negotiated the overseas sale of Australian exports, principally wheat and wool.

Shortly after Watts became Treasurer, Prime Minister Hughes left for Britain in April 1918 to represent Australia in war council meetings and then in post-war planning and reparations discussions. Hughes remained overseas for seventeen months.

Watts took charge of the administration of Australia during this period, acting as Prime Minister and chairing Cabinet meetings in Hughes' absence.

Because he acted in the role and was never commissioned in his own right as Prime Minister, William Watt does not have his name recorded on the national list of former Australian Prime Ministers. There is no doubt, however, that William Watt warrants public recognition for this period of service as acting head of Australia's Commonwealth government.

In acknowledgment of his role in trade negotiations and his broader contribution to the Australian Commonwealth, William Watt was appointed a Privy Councillor in 1920.

In 1923, Watt accepted appointment as Speaker of the House of Representatives. As the Age newspaper recounts, "he controlled the debates in the Chamber with a dignity, good humor and ability that have never been surpassed in an Australian parliament."⁴ He stepped down as Speaker in 1926 when the Commonwealth parliament located parliamentary proceedings permanently in Canberra.

Concluding Statement

William Watt's cumulative contributions to the cause of Australian Federation, to the people and State of Victoria and to the people and Commonwealth of Australia comprise compelling grounds to name a new Commonwealth electorate in Victoria in his honour.

⁴ The Age (Melbourne, Victoria) 9 April 1938 p 3