

# 1931 FIRST AUSTRALIAN BECOMES THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL

Sir Isaac Alfred Isaacs was seventy-five when he was sworn in as the first native-born Governor-General of Australia, at Parliament House in Melbourne on 22 January 1931. It was a most controversial appointment — opposed even by the King, George V — but one which visibly demonstrated that Australia was no longer in any way subordinate to Great Britain, but rather linked with her in equal partnership based on a common loyalty to the Crown.

This ‘independence’ had been laid down in principle at an Imperial Conference held in London in 1926, when it was decided that the Governor-General of a self-governing dominion such as Australia was the personal representative of the monarch, and not of the British Government.

Thus the British Cabinet would no longer advise the Crown on such appoint-

ments, as had been the case since Federation (albeit after consultations with the Australian Government). Instead, the Federal Ministry would have the right to submit the name of its candidate for the position of Governor-General directly to the King — or so Labor Prime Minister James Scullin obviously believed when he decided early in 1930 to recommend Isaacs as the successor to Lord Stonehaven, then close to retirement.

Isaacs was born in Melbourne on 6 August 1855 to an expatriate Polish tailor and his wife, both of them Jewish. After a brief spell as a school-teacher, he read law at Melbourne University and entered the Victorian Bar in 1880, taking silk nine years later.

He entered politics as a member of the Legislative Assembly in 1882 and served as Solicitor-General and Attorney-General in several ministries, as well as taking an active part in the Federal Convention which drafted the Commonwealth constitution. Four years after becoming a Federal M.P. in 1901, Isaacs was appointed Commonwealth Attorney-General but, after only fifteen months, was elevated to the Bench of the High Court.

He was appointed K.C.M.G. in 1928, and became Chief Justice of Australia in 1930.

The news that Isaacs had been recommended for the position of Governor-General created an uproar in anti-Labor circles — although there were those who suspected that his religion contributed significantly to the intensity of the opposition.

John Latham, then leader of the Opposition in Federal Parliament, warned

that this 'practically republican' policy would result in:

... a real prejudice to the prestige of Australia... It will sever an important link with what the great majority of Australians are still proud to call 'the Mother Country'. It will be a gratuitously unfriendly gesture at a particularly critical time... If, however, the ministry persists in an endeavour to remove from Australia the most visible sign of our membership of the British Empire, the people of Australia will at a later date have an opportunity of expressing their opinion.

Retorted *Smith's Weekly*:

Complaint is flung at the name of Isaac Isaacs, because he is not an insignificant British peer or politician; he is merely a great Australian. And the only argument the complainants can proffer is this — that a gewgaw English Earl or a discarded party hack from British politics is a 'link' by whose strength Australia is held in attachment to Britain.

The Scullin Ministry remained adamant about its choice, even though the King made it clear that he was strongly opposed to it, mainly because he had not been consulted before the recommendation was made. He and his advisers held that the 1926 Imperial Conference had not given the Australian Government the right to nominate Governors-General.

There were strong pressures on Scullin, both from Britain and within Australia, to avoid a potentially embarrassing showdown; he, in reply, would only agree to delay the matter until the next Imperial Conference.

Early in November 1930, the conference agreed that dominions had the

right to recommend their own candidates, but that the monarch should be consulted informally beforehand so that he could state any possible objections.

Almost immediately Scullin approached the King, noted the monarch's reasons for not approving of Isaacs, but nevertheless insisted on his appointment. The King, with obvious reluctance, eventually agreed.

Isaacs served with great distinction through the bitter days of the Depression, voluntarily taking a 25 per cent reduction in salary and refusing his judge's pension until he retired as Governor-General in January 1936. Twelve years later, aged ninety-two, he died in Melbourne and was honoured with a State funeral.

To rise from poverty to the highest position in the land is in itself a great achievement. But that is not all that can be said of Sir Isaac Isaacs. He was also, as his biographer, Sir Zelman Cowan, himself an Australian Governor-General, put it:

... a remarkable man and greatly gifted; the kind of man who, in the sweep and range of his interests, does not often arise in this age of specialisation; a man with the confidence, outlook and philosophy that birth in the mid-nineteenth century often gave. His greatest achievements were as a judge and as a lawyer; such achievements do not make the headlines, nor are they easily known and appreciated except by specialists, but his entitlement to rank as a great Australian is unassailable.