

## William McMahon

### **Prime Minister of Australia 1971–72**

William ('Billy') McMahon was born in Sydney in 1908. Educated at Sydney Grammar School and the University of Sydney, where he studied law, he practised as a solicitor before enlisting in the 2nd AIF in early 1940. He served in Australia before being discharged in 1945 with the rank of Major. After the war McMahon returned to university to study economics.

McMahon entered parliament in 1949, winning the Sydney House of Representatives seat of Lowe for the Liberal Party. This was the election that returned the Liberals to government – in coalition with the Country Party – for a period in power that lasted 23 years. McMahon served on the backbench for only 18 months before promotion to the ministry as Minister for the service departments of Navy and Air (1951–54). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he served successively as Minister for Social Services (1954–56), Primary Industry (1956–58), Labour and National Service (1958–66), Treasurer (1966–69), External Affairs (1960–70) and Foreign Affairs (1970–71).

McMahon served as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party under Prime Ministers Harold Holt and John Gorton between 1966 and 1971. He would have been the logical choice as leader (and Prime Minister) to replace Holt following Holt's disappearance and presumed death while swimming in December 1967. But Country Party leader John McEwen threatened to withdraw from the coalition if McMahon became Prime Minister. In March 1971, one month after McEwen's retirement from parliament, McMahon succeeded in a leadership challenge against Gorton and became Prime Minister.

The McMahon government was responsible for a number of initiatives – it was the first to create a department solely responsible for Aboriginal Affairs, and it effectively ended Australia's military commitment to Vietnam. After 23 years of coalition government, McMahon lost the 1972 general election to a Labor Party, rejuvenated under the leadership of Gough Whitlam and the popular 'It's time' slogan. McMahon resigned as party leader after the election. He remained in parliament until 1982 but did not have a front bench role in later Liberal governments.

McMahon was appointed a member of the Privy Council in 1966, made a Companion of Honour in 1972, and knighted in 1977. He died in Sydney in 1988.

## National Archives holdings relating to William McMahon

The National Archives holds many records relating to William McMahon's years in parliament, including his period as Prime Minister and the many years he spent as a minister. These include a collection of McMahon's personal records, as well as substantial holdings of departmental records.

In the tables below, reference numbers are linked 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.

### Personal records of William McMahon – Canberra

| Title or description of record  | Date range | Series number |
|---|------------|---------------|
| <a href="#">Speech files of William McMahon</a>                                       | 1944–69    | M4250         |
| <a href="#">Correspondence files as Minister for External (later Foreign) Affairs</a> | 1966–71    | M4251         |
| <a href="#">Office files as Minister for External (later Foreign) Affairs</a>         | 1967–71    | M4252         |

### Selected records about William McMahon – Canberra

| Title or description of record   | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <a href="#">Japan – relations with Australia – visit of Mr William McMahon to Japan and Far East</a>   | 1951–52    | A1838, 480/2/10/2   |
| <a href="#">Visit to Japan and Korea – Hon. William McMahon, Minister for Air and Navy</a>   | 1952–53    | A462, 114/32        |
| <a href="#">[Menzies papers] Correspondence with William McMahon regarding communism in trade unions, employment, industrial charter etc</a> | 1954–64    | M2576, 2            |
| <a href="#">[Casey papers] Hon. William McMahon (includes speech 'Australia Today' given in Perth, 19 Jan 1957)</a>                          | 1956–57    | A10302, 1957/384    |
| <a href="#">Pen sketches of Harold Edward Holt and William McMahon by Sir Paul Hasluck</a>   | 1959       | A2668, 1            |
| <a href="#">Press statements by the Hon William McMahon, Minister for Labour and National Service</a>  | 1960–65    | AA1968/119, 16      |
| <a href="#">[Barnes papers] McMahon, Hon. William – personal representations</a>   | 1964–67    | M78, M-MC6          |
| <a href="#">The Hon William McMahon – honour (public proposal)</a>   | 1965       | A463, 1965/5432     |
| <a href="#">Treasurer William McMahon's Budget speech – 16 Aug 1967 – press cuttings</a>   | 1967       | A5954, 1918/19      |
| <a href="#">[Gorton papers] John McEwen and William McMahon rift</a>   | 1967       | M3787, 32           |
| <a href="#">Gorton and McMahon ministries – Cabinet files</a>  | 1968–72    | A5882               |
| <a href="#">National Times articles on PM William McMahon, Sept 1971</a>   | 1971       | A1209, 1969/9056    |
| <a href="#">McMahon Ministry – Cabinet submissions</a>   | 1971–88    | A5908               |
| <a href="#">McMahon Ministry – folders of decisions of Cabinet and Cabinet committees</a>  | 1971–72    | A5909               |

## Sydney

| Title or description of record   | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <a href="#">McMahon, W – interview with journalist Fraser, Alan (audio tape)</a> | 1966       | C102, 1499446       |

## Melbourne

| Title or description of record   | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <a href="#">[Casey papers] McMahon, Rt Hon. William – CH MP – Prime Minister, External Affairs Minister, Treasurer etc</a> | 1953–72    | M1129, McMahon/W    |