

Downer family collection

Downer family collection

The Downer family have been key players in South Australian conservative politics since before Federation. From Sir John Downer's work on the drafting of the Australian Constitution and as an inaugural Senator for South Australia, then Sir Alick Downer serving as Minister for Immigration during a period of rapid growth in Australia's population, to Alexander Downer's time as Australia's longest-serving Foreign Minister, the Downers advanced Australia's international reputation.

Alexander Downer

Alexander Downer was constantly exposed to the world of politics at a young age. He entered the workforce as an economist for the Bank of New South Wales before joining the Australian diplomatic service. In 1984 he was elected to the House of Representatives as Liberal Member for Mayo, a newly-created seat based in the Adelaide hills.

Alexander had a long and successful career in parliament, rising through the ranks of opposition until he served as leader of the Liberal Party from May 1994 to January 1995. In 1996 he became Foreign Minister and held that position until 2007.

Upon his retirement from politics in 2008, his international relations experience was used as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Cyprus until 2014. Following in his father's footsteps, he was appointed as Australia's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in 2014.

Sir Alexander (Alick) Downer

Alexander Downer senior, known throughout his life as Alick, was born in Adelaide in 1910. He completed degrees in economics, politics, and law at Oxford, and returned to South Australia in 1934 to practice law.

In 1949 he was elected to the House of Representatives as the Liberal Member for Angas, based around the South Australian riverlands.

In 1958 Prime Minister Robert Menzies appointed him as Minister for Immigration. He promoted Australia's newly-relaxed immigration policies among European nations.

Following the 1963 election, Sir Alick was appointed as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom between 1964 and 1972. He battled to keep Britain's attention on Australia through a time when Britain was preparing to enter the European Economic Community.

Sir John Downer

John Downer was born in 1843 in the newly-established colony of South Australia. He was admitted to practice as a barrister when he was only 22 and built a reputation as one of Adelaide's best advocates.

He was elected as a member of the South Australian House of Assembly for the district of Barossa in 1878 until 1901. He was appointed Attorney-General in 1881 where he advocated for the right of married women to hold their own property, and the right of accused people to give evidence on their own behalf.

In 1885, he was elected Premier of South Australia and served two terms. He advocated for the federation of Australia, and was a leading delegate to both the 1891 and 1897–98 conventions, helping to draft the proposed Australian Constitution.

Following Federation in 1901, Sir John was elected to the first federal Senate, where he defended the new Constitution and the political and legal institutions that it established.

National Archives records relating to Alexander Downer and family

The National Archives holds a collection of personal records created by Alexander Downer and his father, Sir Alick Downer. Commonwealth records relating to Sir Alick Downer, including records of his army service during World War II are also held. Selected records are listed below.

Alexander John Gosse Downer (CP 447)

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>General subject files, alphabetical series</u> | 1981–90 | M2190 |
| <u>Parliamentary and other committee papers, alpha/chronological series</u> | 1983–92 | M3238 |

Sir Alexander Russell Downer (CP 261)

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Speeches</u> | 1936–72 | M1001 |
| <u>Maiden speech 1950</u> | 1950 | M1001, NN |
| <u>Ministerial files</u> | 1958–63 | M1005 |
| <u>High Commissioner files</u> | 1964–72 | M1003 |
| <u>Correspondence – Downer to Lord Casey, Governor-General</u> | 1967–69 | M1003, Downer to Lord Casey |

| | | |
|--|------|---------------------------|
| <u>Cablegram – Five Power talks – 11 June 1969</u> | 1969 | M1003, Five Power Talks |
| <u>Letters and cables – Sir Robert Menzies</u> | 1971 | M1003, Letters and cables |

Department of Defence [III] (CA 46)

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Second AIF personnel dossier – Downer, Alexander Russell</u> | 1939–48 | B883, SX10422 |
| <u>CMF personnel dossier – Downer, Alexander Russell</u> | 1940–47 | B884, S11110 |
| <u>Army pay file (2AIF) – Downer, Alexander Russell</u> | 1940–47 | D1358, SX10422 |
| <u>Australian POW index entry – Downer, Alexander Russell</u> | 1942–48 | A14171, SX10422 |

Photographs

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series number |
|--|------------|---------------|
| <u>At the Federal Convention, Adelaide, March 1897, three lawyers were entrusted to draft the Australian Constitution: Mr (later Sir) Edmund Barton, Sir John Downer and Mr Richard O'Connor</u> | 1903 | A1200, L16929 |
| <u>The seventh ministry of Robert Menzies, before 30 November 1963 federal election.</u> | 1963 | A1200, L45498 |

Further information

At the request of Alexander Downer, the National Archives transferred the private records from the Downer family collection to the University of South Australia in November 2014. The collection comprises items dating from 1887 through to 2014, including photographs, newspaper clippings, reports, diaries, correspondence, artwork, and regalia collected from international travel and diplomatic engagements. The Alexander Downer Collection of personal papers and artefacts related to his own, as well as his father's and grandfather's careers, is held at the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library.