

M E M B E R B I O G R A P H Y : S I R I S A A C I S A A C S

WHAT TREMENDOUS inspiration and insight awaits us when we consider the lives of the remarkable Australian men and women who forged our great nation.

Following on from the illustrious Ivy Weber in our series on extraordinary Australian Unity members, we're proud to present another visionary Australian who rose from humble beginnings to become not only our first Australian-born Governor-General but a man recognised as one of the drivers of Federation, a pioneering campaigner for social justice and equality, and an early champion of physical fitness and healthy living.



SIR ISAAC ISAACS: OF THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

With a father who was a Jewish tailor of Polish origins and a mother he idolised and referred to throughout his life as 'Mammie', today Isaac Isaacs could pass for a character in a Woody Allen film. Not to mention that impressively theatrical name.

But if ever a young man pulled himself up by his bootstraps, it was the indomitable Isaac Isaacs.

It's a long way for a poor boy from Yackandandah to Canberra and a knighthood, but that's exactly the route Isaac navigated.

Born in Melbourne in 1855 and the oldest of six children, Isaac's early school life took place in several small northern Victorian towns. It wasn't long before his intelligence shone through and by the time he graduated from Beechworth Grammar School as dux, his vision for a life in the professions was set.

So it was back to Melbourne for Isaac, and a place in the School of Law at the illustrious University of Melbourne.

After studying and working full-time to pay his way, Isaac graduated in 1880 with first class honours. He went to the bar in 1882 and became a Master of Laws in 1883. Not bad for a kid from the bush.

It is perhaps because of his modest beginnings – and perhaps as a Jewish person in 1800s Australia – that Isaac was ardently dedicated to social justice and equality, a position that remained his hallmark throughout his long life.

During his time at the bar, Isaac, along with Alfred Deakin, became an active

and vocal member of the Australian Natives Association (ANA), a forerunner to Australian Unity.

Isaac was a member of the Prahran branch of ANA in Melbourne, a benefit society dedicated to promoting the social and intellectual improvement of its members. He spoke at many ANA meetings and in 1893 he addressed a meeting urging support for the progression to Federation.

"I look forward to the day when I can say 'I am an Australian,'" he said – a memorable remark for a man who was to go on to hold one of the highest offices in the soon-to-be-formed nation.

Isaac was a tireless driver for forward-looking change. At the annual ANA banquet of 1898 in Bendigo, he spoke alongside Alfred Deakin in support of a bill of rights for the Australian constitution, a push that is still active today.

In many ways Isaac was ahead of his times. His lifelong health and fitness regime, for example, is one that many of us strive to replicate in 2008. Known for his remarkable mental and physical stamina, he attributed his unflagging energy to his fitness and good health. All throughout his life, Isaac swam often, walked regularly, neither smoked cigarettes nor drank alcohol, and ran long distances until middle age.

Fit and focused, it wasn't long before a career in politics called. By then married with two small daughters, in 1892 Isaac was elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly as the member for Bogong.

His inaugural parliamentary policy speech gives us an insight into what he stood for. Isaac was a nation builder. In the midst of the Great Depression of

the 1890s, his rousing maiden speech painted a picture of a more united and equitable Australia. He called for support for Federation and advocated visionary changes such as equitable retrenchments, income tax in place of less fair indirect tax, company law reform, national railway reform and industrial conciliation.

And so his political career continued to climb. In 1893, Isaac was appointed Victoria's Solicitor-General and in 1901 became acting Victorian Premier.

With the advent of Federation in 1901 – an event Isaac Isaacs had supported and urged – he was elected to Australia's first Federal parliament in the seat of Indi as a radical protectionist Liberal.

Alfred Deakin was by now Prime Minister and in 1905 he appointed Isaac as Federal Attorney-General, an interesting thing to do while Isaac was still maintaining a significant presence at the Victorian bar.

While brilliant and hard working, Isaac sometimes proved difficult and dogmatic, so in 1906 Deakin extracted him from politics and appointed him to the High Court bench where he served for the next 24 years as a learned but often dissenting justice. He was knighted in 1928.

At the age of 75, when most people were relaxing in retirement, the most controversial event of his high-profile life was about to take place.

In 1930, the then Labor Prime Minister, James Scullin, appointed Isaac as Chief Justice. Soon after, Scullin decided – for the first time – to appoint an Australian as Governor-General instead of an Englishman, and proposed Australian-born, Jewish Isaacs for the position.

Both the Nationalist opposition and

the conservative press protested vehemently, and Prime Minister Scullin was compelled to travel to London to personally convince a sceptical King George V to endorse the appointment, which he reluctantly agreed to do after stating his objection that Isaacs was a 'local man' and unknown to him.

Proving the wisdom of the appointment, Isaac served as Governor-General through particularly difficult times with great diligence and distinction. His term ended in 1936, at the age of 81.

In his role as Governor-General, Sir Isaacs was remarkable not only for his enormous zest but for the sacrifice and frugality he displayed.

Who amongst our current leaders, for example, would do as he did, voluntarily surrendering one quarter of his salary, giving up his official residences in Sydney and Melbourne, and relinquishing most official entertaining and his judge's pension?

Elderly but in good health, in retirement Sir Isaacs remained active in various public service causes into his nineties, and wrote and advised regularly on issues of constitutional law.

There is no denying that the poor Jewish boy from the bush who said 'I look forward to the day when I can say I am an Australian' made an invaluable contribution to the formation of our nation, and to the society-wide social justice and equality we enjoy today.

Sir Isaac Isaacs died peacefully in his sleep in February 1948, aged 92. ^w

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www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/federation/