



What's the story?

Encyclopedia of New Zealand

1931

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## FORBES, George William

(1869–1947).

Farmer-politician and Prime Minister.

George William Forbes was born in Lyttelton on 12 May 1869, the third son of Robert Forbes, ship's chandler. He was educated at the Lyttelton Borough School and at Christchurch Boys' High School (1882–83). He worked for a Christchurch merchant and then for his father. Forbes was a good athlete and played halfback for the celebrated Canterbury rugby team of 1892, leading the side against Otago. Forbes retained a vivid boyhood memory of Sir George Grey speaking in Christchurch, and was greatly influenced by George Laurenson, left-wing Liberal member (1899–1913) for Lyttelton, a town with radical traditions. Forbes joined a Christchurch debating society, showing some promise as a speaker. In 1893 he drew a section in the Cheviot ballot, but found it too small. He was lucky enough to draw another section in the homestead block and thereafter began to interest himself in local affairs. Forbes was for two years president, and for eight years secretary, of the Cheviot Settlers' Association. He was also a foundation member of the Cheviot County Council, and played a prominent part in the campaign for the Waipara-Cheviot railway. Several men, including Forbes, sought the Liberal candidate for Hurunui in 1902, but Seddon placed his "hallmark" on A. W. Rutherford, a shrewd, popular runholder. The Premier told Forbes he must bide his time, but the young Cheviot farmer went to the ballot, running a poor fourth.

Possibly as a consolation, Seddon appointed him to the 1905 Royal Commission on land tenure and settlement, Forbes being well-known as a staunch leaseholder. In 1908 Rutherford did not stand, and Forbes was elected Member for Hurunui, holding the seat until his retirement in 1943. In his maiden speech, Forbes linked land settlement and the relief of unemployment, demonstrating his position as one of the small and diminishing band of rural Liberal "leasehold" members. When the Mackenzie Ministry was formed (March 1912), Forbes became Liberal whip, a position which he held till 1922.

In the general election of 1919, Forbes's party suffered a severe setback and the loss of its leader, Ward. After W. D. S. MacDonald's brief tenure, T. M. Wilford was elected Leader of the Opposition (1920). There were now strong advocates for Reform-Liberal fusion, but Forbes resisted any attempt to break with the party's more radical past, and would not allow that left-wing votes must be abandoned to Labour. He supported the change of title to "Liberal-Labour" in 1922. The party, however, lost further ground, and in 1925 the decision was taken to make fresh approaches to Massey for the formation of a National party. Forbes led the Liberal delegation at the final unsuccessful conference (June), after which Wilford accused Coates, Massey's successor, of having "changed, bolted, and barred the door". The Liberal leader then announced that his party would take the title of "National", but soon after resigned. The party caucus thereupon elected Massey as leader, although T. K. Sidey had strong claims. The Christchurch *Press* summed up the general

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reaction: "The people of Canterbury have reared him, they like him, they have seen him play magnificent football. But they have not begun to think of him yet as a political leader ... and Mr Forbes will have to help." In his first election campaign, however, Forbes was quite overshadowed by Coates and Holland. His party was reduced to nine, and seemed on its last legs. Yet the swift decline of Coates's popularity and the suspicion of Labour left a political gap which was, in the event, exploited by the formation of a new third party, United. To bring varied and incompatible elements together for just long enough was the remarkable feat of A. E. Davy, Coates's 1925 organiser. Forbes came forward in February 1928 as "Leader" of the new party. A formal ballot held in September resulted in a deadlock between A. E. Ransom and Forbes. Davy then engineered an invitation to the ailing 70-year-old Ward. On his acceptance, Forbes gracefully stepped down. He had lost his party and then his leadership, and his political star seemed in eclipse.

Yet the paradoxical election of 1928 in fact opened the way for him to reach the highest political office. In December 1928 Ward became Prime Minister with Labour support. Forbes was his deputy and Minister of Lands and Agriculture. Ward was only intermittently capable of work, and Forbes was *de facto* head of the inexperienced Cabinet from about October 1929 until Ward's retirement in May 1930. The United caucus then elected Forbes as leader, and he formed his ministry on 28 May. Mindful of Forbes's Liberalism, Labour continued its conditional support, but while Forbes was in Britain for the 1930 Imperial Conference, a controversial Unemployment Bill was passed in ambiguous form. Forbes returned to find New Zealand staggering under the full impact of depression (January 1931). In one blunt statement he broke with Labour on the unemployment issue: there would be no sustenance payments without work. He then put forward economy proposals which were opposed by Labour but supported by Reform. Forbes offered party union to Coates, but the latter resisted until the eleventh hour (September 1931), when Forbes dug his toes in and virtually compelled the Reform leader to join a Coalition Government. Of their final manoeuvres, James McCombs said: "(Coates) laid a trap for the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister laid one for the Leader of the Opposition, and the Prime Minister has caught his bird." Forbes remained as Prime Minister but had to sacrifice some United colleagues to Reform, which took the most important portfolios.

The new ministry was faced with an economic crisis, and its record remains a matter of historical controversy. It is agreed that its constructive achievements were the work of Coates and his advisers, and that Forbes was supervisor rather than leader. He was not the man to devise bold, imaginative policies, and his chief function was to act as political shield for orthodox and unpopular policies of deflation. His inflexibility both surprised and infuriated Labour members who had not expected such flintiness in the mild and friendly Forbes. Nor did they expect that the old Liberal of Lyttelton and Cheviot would strike down the twin pillars of Liberalism – the graduated land tax and compulsory arbitration. Forbes attended the World Economic Conference in 1933, and the Dominion Prime Ministers' Meeting in 1935. His conservative imperialism was of the order of Bell and Coates. He went to the country in 1935 as leader of the National Political Federation. A crushing electoral defeat, which reduced his party from 51 to 19, was widely interpreted as a vote against Forbes and Coates, the two leaders, and the symbols of depression government. Forbes took his place as Leader of the Opposition in 1936. There was pressure in the National Party (formed in May 1936) to choose a new leader, and Forbes resigned at the end of the session (October). Adam Hamilton defeated C. A. Wilkinson, candidate of the ex-United group. Forbes then retired into the background, though he stood once more in 1938.

Forbes died at his home, Crystal Brook, Cheviot, on 17 May 1947. His name is honoured in the George Forbes Memorial Library at Lincoln Agricultural College, Canterbury.

Forbes's career to 1928 was that of a politician of the second rank with less than average luck. In a party other than Liberal, he might have enjoyed some years of junior Cabinet rank. Like Massey, he was prepared for leadership by a long period as party whip, but Massey's ship sailed with an electoral tide, while Forbes's was left almost high and dry. A unique set of circumstances transmuted the leader of a party in decline into the head of a State in crisis. Historians have



expressed wonderment and even derision at the change, but Forbes possessed some of the necessary attributes of a leader of government. Genial, conciliatory, and straightforward, he earned the trust and liking of his colleagues. As political halfback behind a beaten pack, he was thoroughly hardened to going down in the face of dangerous rushes, and revealed his greatest talent for defence in 1932–35. Fraser paid tribute to his rare debating skill, to his ability in gauging the feeling of the House, and to his humour and tremendous memory. Though not possessing Massey's great industry, Forbes had a good deal of his skill in summing up the issues in a situation. Forbes's reputation still lies in the shadow of the depression. As "Honest George" he was held up in 1931 as a kind of New Zealand Stanley Baldwin, but the succeeding years rather harshly tarnished this image of courageous integrity into one of short-sighted stubbornness. Forbes was neither as good as he was painted in 1931, nor as bad as his enemies made him out to be in 1935. New Zealand in those years needed a wise political general: Forbes was only a brave one, promoted by default. He would have deserved better of his country as the defender of wise but unpopular policies, but many of those over which he presided were both unwise and unpopular.

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