



First Premier of Queensland

Robert George Wyndham Herbert (1831-1905)

Born on 12 June 1831 in Brighton, England, the only son of a barrister, Algernon Herbert, Robert Herbert attended Eton from 1844 until 1849 and then entered Balliol College, Oxford. He graduated with Honours in 1854 and was elected a fellow of All Souls. Graduating in law in 1856, Herbert was called to the Bar in 1858.

In June 1859, Sir George Ferguson Bowen was appointed Governor of the new colony of Queensland. He was authorised to select a private secretary who could also become Colonial Secretary of Queensland, 'independent of local influences'. Bowen chose Herbert and on the 10 December 1859, Robert George Herbert was commissioned as Colonial Secretary. He was only 28. In the 1860 elections for Members of the first Legislative Assembly in the Parliament of Queensland, Herbert was invited to contest three seats and was returned unopposed in the electorate of Leichhardt.

From 22 May 1860 until February 1866, Herbert was the elected leader of the Queensland Government. Lacking any parliamentary experience, Herbert relied on his legal training to deliver clear and effective debate on matters. However, according to Charles Bernays he was not an impressive public speaker: 'His language, as might be expected, was good, but his delivery was slightly halting, and his argument not too cohesive.' Herbert was assisted by the lack of any formal Opposition in those early days.

Education and land legislation were the areas of major concern. The biggest education issue was the cessation of

state aid to religion and with regards to land, the concern of settling the land and promoting agriculture. Herbert determined that government should keep pace with settlement, and, indeed, encourage it. Another high priority of Herbert's government was the expansion and diversification of Queensland's production. Herbert was impressed with the suitability of Queensland for tropical produce, and had high hopes for the colony as a producer of cotton, but along with many others he lost his own investments in the crop.

In February 1866, Robert Herbert turned the premiership over to Macalister and sat as a Private Member until August 1866 before returning to



Portrait of Queensland's first Premier, Sir Robert George Wyndham Herbert painted by Michael Nicholas



England. On 20 August, the morning of his departure, the Courier farewelled him unkindly: ‘... while we wish him a safe return to England, we may add a hope that he will remain there.’

From 1871 until 1892, (and briefly in the period 1899-1900) he served as Permanent Under-Secretary in the Colonial Office. Herbert never returned to Australia, or to any other colony. His long career in the Colonial Office belied the 1867 belief of an unfriendly Queensland journalist that he would be ‘swathed in red tape and reclining on the even surface of foolscap ... gasp forth his last breath in the atmosphere of a sub-undersecretaryship.’

He was ‘the perfect public servant, imperturbable and efficient, with an outwardly gracious manner.’ According to Bernays, ‘In his few short years of colonial experience he unlearned many valueless, old-world traditions which he had imported and tried to make applicable to a new and undeveloped land, and when his time came to leave Queensland, he was a better and broader-minded man for the experience gained.’

Herbert was made Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath in 1882 and Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath in 1892. Unmarried, he died on 6 May 1905 at Ickleton, England.



Electoral map of Leichhart during the time Herbert represented the area.