



**Ward, Joseph George** 1856 - 1930  
Merchant, politician, prime minister

Joseph George Ward (registered at birth as Joseph Ward) was born in Hawke Street, North Melbourne, Australia, on 26 April 1856, the son of Irish immigrant parents William Ward, a clerk, and his wife, Hannah Dorney. Joseph was their third surviving child; seven others died in infancy. William Ward's health deteriorated, probably from alcoholism, and by 1858 the family was in financial trouble with William out of work. In 1860 he died, aged 31, from delirium tremens.

For some time Hannah Ward had been carrying the full burden of the family while running a small liquor shop in Abbotsford Street, near the main roads north to the goldfields. At the end of 1862 she married John Barron, a butcher, but the marriage quickly failed. In September 1863 Hannah Ward Barron (as she was subsequently known) brought her children, Mary (Mina), William and her favourite, Joseph, to New Zealand. They settled at the southern most port of Bluff (officially called Campbelltown until 1917). Hannah Ward Barron set up a store at Greenhills and then a boarding house in Gore Street that catered to sailors. She and her family were tightly bound together by the tragedies of Melbourne, their Catholic faith in a predominantly Protestant region, and their burning ambition to succeed in New Zealand. Hannah Ward Barron was prepared to take risks; in 1870 she borrowed heavily to acquire more property and convert her boarding

house into the Club Hotel, which she was to run until her death on 10 November 1898.

Joseph received his early education at Spring's Academy in Melbourne and then at Campbelltown School where he was one of the more enterprising spirits, teaching the others how to sell the feathery native grass, toetoe, to ship visitors. At 13 his formal education came to an end. However, he read widely throughout his life and his retentive memory stored a broad general knowledge. It was from his mother, with her unquenchable optimism, keen insight and shrewd business instinct, that Ward was to learn how to trade successfully. She also imbued him with her simple Catholicism.

Joseph joined the post office as a message boy in 1869 but was soon sacked for being impudent to his employer. In the meantime he had learned Morse code, and later as postmaster general he enjoyed confounding dignitaries escorting him on tours of inspection by smartly tapping out his own telegrams. Ward then worked as a clerk at Samuel Nichol's general store on the Bluff waterfront until 1876 when he briefly joined the Public Works Department as chief clerk, handling the loading and unloading of ships. Sometime in 1877 or 1878 Hannah Ward Barron lent her son £800 with which he built storage sheds on the waterfront.

Joseph Ward was beginning what became a lifetime mercantile enterprise buying wool, grain and skins. In time he acquired shipping agencies and sold supplies such as grass seed, sheep dip, fertiliser and supplementary stockfeed to Southland's rapidly growing number of small farmers.

Hard work, borrowed capital and political influence were equal ingredients in Ward's steady progress in Southland. In 1878, when still only 21, he was elected to the Campbelltown Borough Council. In 1881 he added the Bluff Harbour Board to what became an impressive list of political trophies. In November - aged 25 - he was mayor, a position which he held until 1886 and again in 1897--98. In February 1883 he was chairman of the harbour board as well, a position from which he was able to influence freight rates and wharf space - both important to J. G. Ward and Company. His company now had its headquarters in the Crescent in Invercargill. Ward held the chairmanship of the harbour board until February 1888, resuming it briefly in 1893 when his company grew shaky and freight rates were much on his mind. He remained a member until 1917.

In 1883 27-year-old Joseph Ward, handsome, olive-skinned and with an expansive moustache, married the tall, graceful Theresa Dorothea De Smidt, who was 10 years younger and the daughter of Bluff's rival publican. There were two ceremonies at Bluff, probably for religious reasons, one on 4 December and the other on the fifth. They were to have five children, four of whom spent their childhood years in Bluff before going away to private schools. It was a most successful marriage. If anything, Theresa Ward grew more beautiful, even stately, with age; she dressed elegantly and wore huge, extravagant hats. Theresa was Joseph's favourite ornament and chief admirer, but she also possessed an independent business intelligence. At difficult moments in his public career, Joseph would turn to Theresa for support.

In 1887 Ward entered Parliament as MHR for Awarua. He was one of the few supporters in Southland of the Stout--Vogel ministry. When others were calling for savage retrenchment, Ward spoke of returning confidence to the economy and of completing several railway projects. As Robert Stout was defeated, Ward entered the house with other young men who had grown up in New Zealand rather than in the 'old country'. Ward, more than the others, quickly revealed a fascination with new technologies and their potential for business expansion and, ultimately, job creation. His market-place skills were never more obvious to his parliamentary colleagues than during the tariff debates of 1888; and his cogent arguments for restructuring New Zealand's mail shipping contracts, delivered at a speed that taxed Hansard reporters, showed that he was often a step or two ahead of ministers of the day. No ideologue, Ward was a technocrat with a passion for getting maximum value from government expenditure. Most commentators noted his

courteous demeanour and his 'bright and happy' style of debating. At this time in his life Joseph Ward was engaging, well dressed and accustomed to success.

When John Ballance's Liberal party took office in January 1891, Ward became postmaster general on condition that he could spend much of his time in Southland looking after his business affairs as well. Interestingly, one of the new minister's first decisions was to reduce the cost of toll calls: a few years later he did the same with telegrams. Invercargill's biggest user was Ward himself, who directed his company and dealt with affairs of state from the second floor of J. G. Ward and Company. It was not until Ballance died in April 1893 and Ward became Richard Seddon's colonial treasurer that his absences from home became more prolonged - with ultimately disastrous consequences for his business.

While never a farmer himself, Ward knew more about the problems of small farmers than most: his company dealt with them every day. He was a strong advocate of closer settlement of the land. Intensive settlement, however, required development capital and Ward began to turn his mind to this question during 1892 and 1893. In the Government Advances to Settlers Act 1894 the government undertook to lend farmers up to 60 per cent of the value of their land at five per cent interest, from funds raised by the state in London. When the first government loan for £1.5 million at three per cent was floated in London early in 1895 it was oversubscribed to a total of £5.9 million. Ward returned to New Zealand to a series of banquets and laudatory addresses for having borrowed so much so cheaply.

Joseph Ward always believed that the state existed to support private enterprise. In June 1891 he ambitiously launched into the frozen-meat industry with his decision to build the Ocean Beach Freezing Works just outside Bluff. An act of Parliament was altered at breakneck speed to facilitate the new development, and capital for it was borrowed overseas. The works, soon to be Southland's largest and most efficient, opened for business in March 1892. Ward now restructured his own finances. Much of the business of J. G. Ward and Company was put into a new farmers' co-operative called the J. G. Ward Farmers' Association. The plan envisaged farmer investment in the association, but this was not forthcoming in substantial amounts. It was managed by John Fisher and Robert Anderson, with Ward as managing director. For a time he also ran the Ocean Beach works, channelling its business through his own bank account. His agents scoured Southland buying up stock for cash, which Ward borrowed from the Colonial Bank of New Zealand; by 1895 he was indebted to the bank for £100,000.

It is doubtful whether Joseph Ward was doing more than covering his costs in 1892 and 1893. When commodity prices slumped in London in 1894 and 1895 and many banks closed their doors, Ward's enterprises were soon in trouble. He sold his interest in the freezing works, and while in London in 1895 borrowed heavily to support the Farmers' Association and relieve the pressure on the enfeebled Colonial Bank. But in October 1895 the Bank of New Zealand, itself recently saved by government legislation pushed through Parliament by Ward, took over the Colonial Bank. The Bank of New Zealand, however, refused to accept liability for the bloated J. G. Ward Farmers' Association account, and the association was soon in receivership. Ward tried desperately to avert his own bankruptcy by arranging for business friends to buy the association. This required Supreme Court sanction which was refused in June 1896. The judge, J. S. Williams, castigated the association and Ward in particular in his judgement. He declared Ward to be 'hopelessly insolvent' and said that he 'should no longer be permitted to roam at large through the business world'. The colonial treasurer had no option but to resign his portfolios, which he did on 16 June. There now followed periods of hope, then despair as Ward attempted once again to sell the association's debts and liabilities to friends, only to have the judge reject the new proposals with even more trenchant comments.

In the meantime Ward fought off a challenge for his seat of Awarua in the general election of December 1896. However, by the middle of 1897 he could no longer avoid bankruptcy. He decided to exploit a loophole in the electoral law that obliged a parliamentarian to resign on

becoming bankrupt but did not exclude a bankrupt from being elected to Parliament. In July 1897 Ward resigned from his seats in Parliament and on the Bluff Harbour Board. He then filed a petition in bankruptcy, and announced his availability again to fill the vacancies. He was re-elected to the House of Representatives in August 1897 with a greatly increased majority and was soon back on the harbour board as well. In November Bluff re-elected him as mayor.

Joseph Ward had transformed his financial trauma into a regional political asset. Most of his more savage critics, including the judge, were well-known members of the Dunedin establishment. Ward's business enterprises had always served the newer, struggling settlers of Southland. He played on their parochialism to good effect; the chaos that had been revealed in the accounts of the Farmers' Association and the sleight of hand that had become an ongoing financial strategy disappeared under a wave of apprehension and indignation at the way outside forces were treating Southland's benefactor.

After Ward's return to Parliament as an undischarged bankrupt, the law was quickly changed to prevent a recurrence. Ward was discharged from bankruptcy, anyway, on 5 November 1897. Theresa Ward and Joseph's friends bought a number of his properties from the official assignee and borrowed enough from the Bank of New South Wales to start a new mercantile enterprise in Invercargill called J. G. Ward and Company. Robert Anderson was general manager. Ward spent most of 1898 and 1899 rearranging his finances, and much of 1899 in London, where he off-loaded for a good price his Nelson Brothers shares. This windfall enabled Ward to repay the Farmers' Association's London creditors, who in their surprise presented him with a handsome black landau. There was enough money left for Ward to repay all his remaining creditors in New Zealand.

Seddon was delighted at the rehabilitation of his colleague. Immediately after the election of December 1899 he returned Ward to cabinet, this time as his deputy with the portfolios of colonial secretary, postmaster general and industries and commerce, to which were soon added railways and public health. Ward was not to be colonial treasurer again until he himself became prime minister. Theresa Ward and the children moved to Wellington, where the old ministerial residence in Tinakori Road was renamed Awarua House. The Wards' home became the centre of polite society, especially after Ward was appointed a KCMG during the royal visit of 1901. Sir Joseph and Lady Ward loved to entertain.

With his expanding girth, gold watch-chain and waxed moustache, Ward was inclined to be more pompous and paranoid after his personal trauma, yet he still possessed his enterprise and commercial drive and had an 'inexhaustible stock of splendid optimism'. These assets he devoted to his portfolios. Ward saw the Post and Telegraph Department and railways as agencies designed to draw the disparate towns and settlements into an interconnected nation, and he encouraged greater use of both. Penny postage was introduced on 1 January 1901: 13 million more letters were posted in the first year of penny postage than in the previous year, resulting in a small profit to the department. New telephone connections were kept at an affordable price. In 1893 there had been 3,811 telephones in the country, but by the time Ward left office as postmaster general in 1912 there were 37,257. He applied the same basic philosophy to railways. Passenger fares were reduced in 1900: patronage - and revenue - soared. While he was minister for railways, work on the North Island main trunk line was pushed ahead at a fast clip. The last connection was opened by him as prime minister in August 1908. As the first minister of public health in the British Empire he armed himself with the power to require local authorities to improve sanitation, hygiene, and water supplies. During his time in office government required midwives to be trained and certificated, and public maternity hospitals were built.

Ward's office was bombarded with applications for preferment, which in time led his opponents to accuse him of showing political and religious bias. The Post and Telegraph Department, it was said, was full of Catholics. Throughout his career, however, Ward strove to ensure that his departments were good employers, and was never shy of taking the credit. The Civil Service

Insurance Act 1893 provided retirement annuities for civil servants, and in 1902 a rudimentary superannuation scheme was provided for railway workers.

When Seddon died on 10 June 1906, Ward was in London. He hastened back to New Zealand and was sworn into office as prime minister on 6 August 1906.

Given the broad electoral base of the Liberal party, Ward's caucus of nearly 60 MHRs in a House of 80 was the next best thing to ungovernable. Worried by the dwindling supplies of land and the constant demands for access to it, the new prime minister at first decided to take risks. He and his minister of lands, Robert McNab, decided that settlers on new subdivisions would be offered leases only, not freehold. The proposal evoked violent opposition from sections of the Liberal caucus as well as from the parliamentary opposition. The government backed off for a time, only to return with a completely different set of proposals in 1907. Friends and foes alike in rural communities were disconcerted by vacillations in policy that suggested less skilful parliamentary management than Seddon's.

Worse was to follow: strikes, largely unknown since 1890, occurred in the freezing and mining industries. The government retaliated by introducing a series of measures restricting the right to strike by unionists registered under the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894. Several regional conferences of trades and labour councils in 1907 passed motions of no confidence in Ward's government. Because there were soon signs that organised labour was intent on standing its own parliamentary candidates, Ward introduced an electoral second ballot for the 1908 election. His calculation was that disenchanted Liberal voters on the left would be likely to support his candidate on the second ballot.

In November 1908 Sir Joseph Ward won his only outright victory as leader of the Liberal party, but suffered a number of setbacks in areas where farming was by now well established. McNab lost his seat. Ward's new cabinet was less able and was faced with increasing agitation from the rural sector for which 'freehold' had become a catchcry. Ward's increasing fascination with foreign policy - he visited London in 1907, 1909 and 1911 and championed imperial federation, imperial trade preference and the establishment of an 'Imperial Council of State' - seemed to his opponents to be a diversion from domestic issues; his much-publicised offer to pay for the construction of the dreadnought HMS *New Zealand* in 1909 became the object of some ridicule. In truth, Ward was having great difficulty in controlling his caucus and several times had to threaten an immediate election to whip his so-called supporters into line. While the economy prospered, Ward's government lacked clear direction. Bold promises of legislation would be lost in controversy, retraction, prevarication then paralysis. The deadlock in the election of December 1911 surprised many. The issue of who would govern was to be settled by calling Parliament, which met on 15 February 1912.

Ward was privately crushed by the election result and talked to the governor, Lord Islington, and others of withdrawing altogether from public life. Before the vote on the confidence motion he announced his intention to resign as prime minister, which he did on 28 March 1912. Meanwhile the Liberals, who survived by the Speaker's casting vote, chose Ward's minister of agriculture, Thomas MacKenzie, to succeed him. Ward holidayed in Australia where he indulged in his new passion for golf. For a time he took a back bench in Parliament; some concluded that his political career was over. Even after William Ferguson Massey's Reform Party defeated MacKenzie's government on a further confidence vote in July 1912, Ward refused to resume the leadership of the Liberal party. His family shifted into a new house in Golf Road, Heretaunga, next to the Wellington Golf Club of which he was patron. He took Theresa and his daughter Eileen to England in 1913. There he gave a speech in support of home rule for Ireland and had his first flight in an aeroplane where - to use his own words - he 'had to hang on like grim death in a thunderstorm'.

However, after returning to New Zealand in August 1913, on 11 September he once again assumed his old position as leader of the Liberals in Parliament. This time he demanded complete control over policy and parliamentary tactics. He now vigorously attempted to put back together the old coalition of 'small settlers' in search of assistance and the more numerous small-town and urban workers. He fought for an early and honourable settlement to the 1913 waterfront dispute and in the 1914 election campaign made a loose arrangement not to stand against labour candidates in city seats. The strategy came within an ace of success: when the House met in June 1915 it was finally confirmed that Massey had the narrowest of majorities. By this time the First World War was dominating the news. Massey approached Ward to form a national ministry. Ward agreed but drove a hard bargain as to numbers and portfolios. On 12 August he was sworn into office as Massey's deputy and as minister of finance and postmaster general, positions which he held until withdrawing the Liberals from the ministry on 21 August 1919. In this period Ward remained as leader of the opposition in name only.

Ward had now entered what was to be a lengthy political twilight to a once bright and innovative career. Where he had once been motivated by programmes and the urge for positive action he seemed now to be driven by a consuming need for self-vindication. Possession of office became his sole *raison d'être*. Ward, the devout Irish Catholic, came to loathe and distrust Massey, the Ulster Orangeman. Relations between the two leaders of the National ministry were at best strained, and hostile most of the time. Ward found the pressure from the Catholic church against conscription difficult to handle, and proved to have little that was economically new to offer those who had put such faith in him in 1914. His taxation measures were even-handed where organised labour expected them to be ruthless with wartime profiteers, especially since the cost of living was edging upwards. Ward worked, as he always had, with great diligence. He attended two imperial conferences with Massey, as well as the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He clearly nursed the hope that he would yet topple the Reform government in 1919. Instead, on 17 December he lost his own seat of Awarua by 757 votes in what had been a bitter election with sectarian overtones.

At 63 and without any elected office for the first time in 42 years, Ward was now seemingly out of politics altogether. The Christchurch *Press* commented that 'the day has gone by for him', and it would be 'idle to pretend that he is any longer a useful force in the public life of the Dominion.'

Just as Ward had clawed his way back from bankruptcy and triumphed over his critics he again fought back, although by this time both he and Theresa were in indifferent health. For a few months they took trips to Australia and England and spent time with their family who were now based in Christchurch. But Ward was seldom far from the political spotlight. There was a bitter edge to his political comments as he denounced the Protestant Political Association of New Zealand for its part in his defeat, and the New Zealand Labour Party for its ingratitude for his efforts on behalf of the workers over the years. Sometimes he encouraged speculation that he might seek election to the British House of Commons. But few doubted that a return to the New Zealand Parliament was his real goal.

An opportunity seemed to present itself in March 1923 when there was a by-election in Tauranga. All the old gusto poured out of Ward's ageing frame as he wooed the Tauranga voters, but he was humiliated by an obscure Reform candidate. Instead he had to wait for a wafer-thin 159-vote victory in Invercargill in the 1925 general election won by Gordon Coates. Massey was now dead, and Ward himself was living in the past. He was the only Liberal left, his former colleagues now calling themselves 'National'. His speeches were trips down memory lane: encounters with old faces and outdated issues, albeit performed with some of the same felicity of yesteryear. There were no specifics about how he would tackle New Zealand's declining economy.

Theresa Ward died on 7 February 1927. Ward's heart and eyesight were causing him trouble, and he suffered from diabetes. His only daughter, Eileen Wood, acted as his hostess, and his second son, Vincent, as his political assistant. He spent six months in England, Canada and the



USA in 1928 where his health was somewhat restored.

Ward seemed to have become a political irrelevance until rumours suddenly began in August 1928 that he had been asked by some of the disparate groups attempting to revive the remnants of the old Liberal party to lead a new 'United' group. Back in New Zealand Ward attended the United Party's conference. On 17 September he was selected as their leader. What followed had an element of tragicomedy. A majority of adherents to the new party were right-wing 'free-marketeters', intent on attacking Coates for excessive borrowing. When he opened his election campaign in Auckland, Ward, either by design or mistake (we will probably never know which), startled his audience by promising to borrow £70 million in a single year to solve the ills of the economy. After several days' confusion, and some time in hospital for Ward, United's organisers confirmed that the promise would stand. It certainly was enough to topple Coates. At the general election on 14 November Reform won 28 seats, United 27 (or 31 if four independent Liberals are included), and Labour 19. In Parliament Labour supported Ward on a no-confidence motion against Coates and on 10 December 1928 he took office once more as prime minister.

What followed was pure farce. Ward cracked hearty and optimistic as of old, but very little of the £70 million was, or could be, borrowed. Unemployment grew through 1929 as economic activity contracted. Ward left political management to his two lieutenants, George Forbes and E. A. Ransom. By September 1929 he was described as being 'in the last stages of decrepitude' and a few weeks later he had a series of heart attacks. He was hospitalised, and barely managed to sign his will, but recovered enough to travel to Rotorua where he stayed at the Prince's Gate Hotel, immersing himself daily in the baths bearing his name. Ward continued to conduct affairs of state until his colleagues assembled at his bedside on 14 May 1930. Under pressure from them as well as from his children he announced his retirement as prime minister. He formally handed over to Forbes on 28 May, but remained a minister without portfolio until his death in Wellington on 8 July. His body was carried with great pomp and ceremony to Bluff where it was buried next to Theresa Ward and near his mother to whom he owed so much. His eldest son, Cyril, inherited the baronetcy which had been conferred on Joseph when he was in London at the coronation of King George V in 1911. Vincent won his father's seat at the Invercargill by-election. Two other sons, Gladstone and Awarua Patrick, as well as Eileen, survived him.

It had been a remarkable career. The public aspect, much nearer to Ward's heart than the mercantile, is conspicuous for its duration. It was over 52 years since he had first been elected to the Campbelltown Borough Council and his 23½ years as a minister of the Crown is still a record. While Ward lacked Seddon's strategic political skills, his capacity for sustained work in the public sector, his optimism and his entrepreneurial talent served New Zealand better than they ever did the personal fortunes of J. G. Ward, whatever his critics said of him. His substantial personal estate of £337,000 at his death had largely been built up by his general manager, Robert Anderson. It wasted alarmingly as the depression of the 1930s ate into his securities.

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