



William Guthrie Spence

# William Guthrie Spence

*Lay preacher and politician*

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William Guthrie Spence was born in Orkney, Scotland in 1846 and arrived in Victoria in the early 1850s. With no formal schooling, he worked in a number of rural jobs and held his first miner's right at the age of fourteen.

Spence played an important role in the early development of the organised Labor movement in Australia. In 1874 he initiated a trade union for miners in the Clunes district. He went on to become general secretary of the Amalgamated Miners' Association (AMA) in Victoria. A superb negotiator, he set out to unite all miners and by 1884 several unions had affiliated loosely to form the AMA of Australasia.

Spence also helped establish the Amalgamated Shearers' Union (ASU) of Australasia in 1886 and was appointed its foundation president. By 1890 he had unionised most shearers in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

In 1894, Spence founded the Australian Workers' Union. He served as its Secretary from 1894 to 1898 and was President from 1898 to 1917. Spence regarded the Union as the industrial wing of the newly formed Labor Party.

Towards the end of the 1890s he moved to NSW and ran successfully for the mining-pastoralist seat of Cobar in the NSW Legislative Assembly, holding that seat from 1898 until 1901. A supporter of Federation, he was elected to the first Federal Parliament in 1901 as member for Darling in far-west NSW, holding his seat until he was defeated in 1917. He won Darwin in Tasmania as a Nationalist candidate that same year, having had a falling out with the Labor Party, and held that seat for two years.

Spence married Ann Jane Savage in 1871 and they had nine children. He died at his son's home in Terang, Victoria on 13 December 1926 aged 80 years.

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