

Optimised Study Guide — Australian Foreign Policy 1918–39

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the changing nature and significance of Australian foreign policy 1918–39 (Unit 3, Elective 1, Component C02-U3E1). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2024 Q4 on the consequences of the 1926 Imperial Conference and the Statute of Westminster. Covers the Paris Peace Conference 1919 and Billy Hughes, League of Nations membership, the 1926 Imperial Conference/Balfour Declaration and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, and the tension between growing independence and continued imperial loyalty. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

Between the wars, Australia slowly acquired the *legal* machinery of an independent nation — yet kept choosing to act as a loyal part of the British Empire. That gap between formal independence and emotional loyalty is the heart of the foreign-policy story, and exactly what examiners want you to weigh.

The marking-key steer. The 2024 essay — *"Assess the consequences of the 1926 Imperial Conference and the Statute of Westminster for Australia's foreign policy"* — rewards answers that trace consequences **across the period**: the documents granted Australia legal independence, yet Australia largely *ignored* that independence in 1939 (Menzies declaring war alongside Britain), only genuinely pivoting after Pearl Harbor. The best answers show this paradox — independence on paper, dependence in practice — and its long-run payoff (the UN, ANZUS, the Colombo Plan).

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** "Assess the consequences of the Imperial Conference / Statute of Westminster," or broader "changes to Australian foreign policy" questions (the 2020 paper asked about changes after 1945).
- **Source analysis.** Sources on Hughes at Versailles, the Empire relationship, or the 1939 declaration of war need precise constitutional knowledge.

Answer the verb. Assess the consequences = judge the significance of the results, short- and long-term. **Analyse the changes** = identify what changed and explain how/why. Both reward the independence-vs-loyalty framing.

1. The Paris Peace Conference (1919) and Billy Hughes

- PM **Billy Hughes** attended Versailles demanding a voice for Australia — a first assertion of a distinct Australian interest within the Empire delegation.
- He pushed for German **reparations** and to retain control of **New Guinea** (gained as a League "mandate"), and notoriously helped **block Japan's racial equality clause** — protecting the White Australia Policy.
- Australia gained separate **membership of the League of Nations** — symbolic of emerging nationhood, though defence and foreign affairs still leaned on Britain.

2. The 1926 Imperial Conference and the Balfour Declaration

- Held in London to settle the constitutional relationship between Britain and the dominions.
- The **Balfour Declaration** affirmed that the UK and the dominions were **equal in status and not subordinate to one another** — a crucial clarification of Australian sovereignty.

3. The Statute of Westminster (1931)

- Gave legal force to Balfour: dominions gained **legislative independence** (control of their own laws, free of the British Parliament) and the power to **make their own treaties**.
- **Crucial caveat for the essay:** Australia was so attached to Britain that it did not even *ratify* the Statute until 1942 — and acted in 1939 as if it had no independent choice at all.

4. The paradox: independence unused (1939)

- On the outbreak of WWII, **Menzies declared Australia at war** simply because Britain was — "as a result, Australia is also at war" — with no separate decision and no political dissent.
- This shows the Statute's powers were *available but unused*: legal independence had not yet become real independence of action.

5. The long-run consequences

- The real pivot came under pressure: after the **fall of Singapore and Pearl Harbor**, Curtin turned to the USA and **recalled Australian troops against Britain's wishes** (see the WWII guide).
- The legal freedom granted in 1926–31 ultimately **enabled** an independent post-war foreign policy: a leading role at the **UN** (Evatt), the British Commonwealth Occupation of Japan, and self-chosen alliances — **ANZUS, the Colombo Plan and SEATO** (developed in the Unit 4 "engagement with Asia" topics).

6. Historical perspectives

- **Gradualist vs event-driven:** did independence grow steadily through Versailles → Balfour → the Statute, or did it only become real when *forced* by the crisis of 1941–42?
- **How "independent" was interwar Australia?** Legal sovereignty vs continued economic, defence and emotional dependence on Britain.

7. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Assess the consequences of the Imperial Conference and Statute of Westminster."** High answers: explain the documents, show that Australia did not use the independence in 1939, then trace the long-run payoff to post-war foreign policy — built on the independence-vs-loyalty paradox.
- **"Analyse changes to Australian foreign policy."** High answers: chart the arc from Empire loyalty toward independence and the US alliance.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Explain Billy Hughes's aims and actions at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference (reparations, New Guinea mandate, blocking racial equality)?
- State what the Balfour Declaration (1926) established?
- State what the Statute of Westminster (1931) granted — and when Australia ratified it?
- Explain the 1939 paradox of independence "available but unused"?
- Trace the long-run consequences to the UN, ANZUS, the Colombo Plan and SEATO?
- Argue both the gradualist and event-driven interpretations of Australian independence?