Sir John Downer was, by profession, a Barrister and became a leading member of the Bar in Adelaide. He became a member of the South Australian Parliament and was, on two occasions, the Premier of South Australia. He was also Senator from 1901 – 1903.

Downer's most significant achievement was as a champion of Federation. He argued for and campaigned relentlessly in favour of the unification of the six Australian colonies. Not only did he participate in the Constitutional Conventions, but he served on the three main Constitutional Drafting Committees which finalised the draft of the Australian Constitution.

Sir John Downer was a Social Reformer implementing legislation giving married women property rights and opposing the White Australia Policy in an era when such liberalism found few supporters.