

### 3. Inside the Canberra Press Gallery

Soon after Christmas 1950, the chief of staff told me I would be going to Canberra for the upcoming session of Parliament. I was excited and anticipated seeing household names such as Menzies, Chifley, Evatt, Fadden and Calwell in action on the floor of Parliament. To serve in the press gallery in Canberra was one of my ambitions, but I feared I was far too junior to be selected for such a job. My father congratulated me. I was twenty-one and still in my cadetship. With another young journalist, Tony Ferguson, who was later to have an illustrious career with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (now Corporation: ABC) including as executive director of *This Day Tonight*, I arrived at Canberra Airport in a Trans-Australia Airlines (TAA) DC3. The terminal was a wooden building, not much bigger than two decent farm sheds. Our home away from home was the Hotel Civic in the heart of Civic Centre. The basis of our stay was all expenses paid by the *Mirror*: taxis when required, laundry, meal payments, and so on. Like the majority of Australians who had not visited the national capital, I could not visualise what it was like, yet it was only some 320 km from Sydney—then a five-hour drive. Was it a smaller version of Sydney without the harbour? Was Parliament House in the middle of the city? I soon realised that Canberra was a country town without a clearly defined centre.

Civic Centre was not and still is not the heart of Canberra. The square footage of the total number of retail establishments and offices in Civic Centre would hardly have equalled those of Queanbeyan, just over the ACT border to the east. Apart from the police station and the Canberra Club, 'Civic' consisted of two colonnaded buildings: the Melbourne and the Sydney Buildings. There were two other 'centres', both south of the Molonglo River: Kingston and Manuka. Both were smaller than Civic. There were picture theatres at Civic and Manuka. Although Canberra was the site of the new Parliament, for many years, the city's development was halted—first by the Depression, then by the war and again by the problems of the postwar placement of literally thousands of returned servicemen back into civilian life. The Chifley Government believed priorities for spending were postwar reconstruction and the avoidance of unemployment, not the development of 'the Bush Capital', as Jack Lang contemptuously referred to Canberra in his newspaper, *Century*. At the beginning of the war in 1939, there were only 13 000 residents, and, on my arrival in 1951, that number had grown to only 25 000. The population is now heading for 350 000. In 1951, the boundary of Canberra north of the Molonglo River was the pine break cutting through Northbourne Avenue, and south of the river, Griffith, Narrabundah, Kingston and Forrest. Deakin had not been built, the Woden Valley had not been developed and Belconnen, Tuggeranong and Gungahlin town centres were still many years away.

The 'provisional' Parliament House in Canberra was nothing like the NSW Parliament House I was familiar with in Macquarie Street, Sydney, which dated back to the mid-1800s. Canberra's Parliament House stood alone, south of the Molonglo, fronting on to lawns to its north; not far beyond, sheep grazed. A market garden alongside the river was on the site where the High Court and National Gallery now stand. The Treasury building and the National Library were yet to be constructed. To the north-east, across the rose garden, the Administrative Building was the only major office in sight. The long, gleaming white parliamentary building of three storeys was flanked on either side by extensive lawns and garden areas enclosed by a high hedge. It was later referred to as 'the wedding cake' because, when viewed from the northern bank of the Molonglo, that is certainly what it resembled. Behind the building was a lane that provided service access for the kitchen, dining rooms and bars. On the other side of the lane running parallel with the parliament building and almost as long was a dense ground-hugging hedge—the habitat of feral cats. Just beyond the lane, Queen Terrace connected Commonwealth Avenue with Kings Avenue—the major thoroughfares connecting the parliamentary precinct with the northern side of the Molonglo. Directly behind Parliament House and on the other side of Queen Terrace was a dusty paddock (Camp Hill), which was used as a car park for those who worked in Parliament House.

John Smith Murdoch, the first Commonwealth Government architect, was asked to design the building to serve as the Parliament for 50 years. He also designed two office buildings in the same style—both white—200 m from Parliament House. East Block overlooked Kings Avenue and West Block overlooked Commonwealth Avenue. For symmetry, their roofs were about the same height as Parliament House, and Queen Terrace linked them to Parliament House. The central axis—a key feature of Walter Burley Griffin's prize-winning design for the national capital—is a unifying concept for the city. It is a straight line running from the top of Mt Ainslie, through the centre of the Australian War Memorial at the foot of Mt Ainslie, down the centre of Anzac Parade, the ceremonial avenue, across the Molonglo (now Lake Burley Griffin), through the centre of Old Parliament House and (now) through the centre of the permanent Parliament House, to Bimberi Peak—the highest mountain in the Brindabella Ranges 25 km to the south. A large statue of King George V stood over King George Terrace—the road running past the front of Old Parliament House. Nobody could miss this imperial monstrosity, slap bang on the central axis.

Whatever Doug Anthony's achievements for the Country Party and later the Nationals, the standout for the nation was his effort in 1964 when only a junior minister with the Interior portfolio. He had the statue moved some 50 m west, so

it no longer interrupted the view from Parliament to the War Memorial. Before he could get Cabinet approval, he first had to convince Menzies—the country’s leading monarchist. Anthony explained:

I raised the ticklish issue with him one afternoon after there had been a good question time in Parliament. Menzies stood silent for a while, looking out the window. Then he said, ‘I suppose you’re right’. Moving the monument restored the magnificent openness of Griffin’s central vista.<sup>1</sup>

There was also a life-size statue of King George V in King’s Hall, unveiled by his son, the Duke of York, when opening the parliament building in May 1927. The statue stood on a marble plinth—handy for resting drinks on during royal balls and similar gay times. Having opened the door of Parliament House at 11 am with a 15-carat gold key, the Duke and Duchess then joined the official party for a lunch of turtle soup, poached salmon and Canberra pudding. At the time, alcohol was not allowed in the national capital, so the drink of the day was non-alcoholic fruit punch.<sup>2</sup> What the Duchess thought of the non-alcoholic fruit punch is not recorded. In later life, as the much-loved Queen Mother, she was known for her wit and fondness for gin and tonic. A London story told of how she was at a function attended by Noel Coward and Louis Mountbatten. When drinks came on, she is reputed to have said to them, ‘I don’t know what you old queens are having but this Queen is having gin and tonic.’

Construction of the building began in 1923 with workers drawn from all over Australia. In 1924 there were 1400 labourers working in Canberra and a similar number of tradesmen. Many of them would have worked on the Old Parliament House and East and West Blocks. A majority would have come from outside Canberra, Queanbeyan and Yass. Most of them were accommodated in makeshift camps of tents and other temporary structures scattered across Canberra. Timber was sourced from the various States to symbolise the federal roots of the building. Bricks came by light rail from the nearby brickworks at Yarralumla. The cost of the building and furnishings totalled more than £600 000—almost three times the original estimate. Two flights of stairs are climbed to reach the front door of Old Parliament House and then another flight inside to get to King’s Hall—the heart of the building.

Everyone in the building—from the Prime Minister to the cleaner—crossed King’s Hall at some stage in a week. With a highly polished parqueted floor and light flooding in from expansive skylights, it is an impressive space, the walls filled with historical paintings, the major subjects of which are prime ministers, speakers and presidents of the Senate. Great occasions were celebrated here,

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1 Sparke, Eric 1988, *Canberra: 1954–1980*, AGPS, Canberra.

2 A source for much of the material is the management of Old Parliament House.

including royal balls. The House of Representatives chamber is alongside King's Hall to the east and the Senate chamber is to the west. Lobbies run from King's Hall around both chambers. The press gallery offices were on the second floor on the house side and directly above the lobby, one floor down running past the Cabinet room, with the Speaker's suite at one end and the Prime Minister's office at the other. The government and opposition party rooms were off the main lobbies on the first floor. Two large courtyards, one on the western side of the building and the other on the eastern side, are each dominated by a poplar tree—grown to enormous size by the time I arrived in the building.

The non-members' bar, opening on to the eastern courtyard, was the centre of social life. The Marquis of Salisbury and Arthur Henderson (a former leader of the British Labour Party and Home Secretary in McDonald's 1924 government) planted the poplars when they visited Canberra in 1926 with the delegation from Westminster of the Empire Parliamentary Association. During the visit to the still unfinished provisional Parliament House, the delegation presented a gift from the British Parliament: the Speaker's chair for the House of Representatives, which was modelled on the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons. The House of Commons burned down during the war after an attack by German bombers and the old chair was lost. When the Commons was rebuilt, the new speaker's chair was modelled on the chair in the House of Representatives. The Australian chair was constructed partly from oak from the roof of Westminster Hall—more than five centuries old—and oak from Nelson's flagship, *HMS Victory*. There were spirited debates in the Parliament about leaving the chair behind when Parliament moved to the new building. Traditionalists wanted it in the new chamber, but the argument against it going was that it would look out of place in the quite different architecture of the new chamber. This argument carried the day and was undoubtedly correct.

The space limitations of the building imposed an egalitarian rule in the lavatories. Ministers, MPs, staffers, journalists and cleaners all used the same lavatories. Years after the move to the permanent parliament building, Mick Young returned to the House of Representatives chamber of Old Parliament House to speak at an event. I cannot remember what the occasion was, although I was present, when Young spoke of his liking for the old building. He remarked upon the fact that the egalitarian use of the lavatories also ruled in the House of Commons at Westminster. He told the story of how, after the war, the British Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee was standing at a urinal when Churchill entered and stood at the urinal at the opposite end from the Prime Minister. Attlee remarked: 'You're a bit stand-offish this morning, Winnie.' 'I won't stand near you,' said Churchill. 'Every time you see something big, you want to nationalise it.' Mick got a good laugh out of the audience.

For decades after the opening of the provisional Parliament House in 1927, most parliamentarians saw very little of Canberra, and from their point of view there was not much to see. There were few restaurants of any note in the 1950s, and, for most parliamentarians, the sitting week consisted of arriving at the Canberra airport at the beginning of the week, spending all day and most of the evening in Parliament House before going to a fairly lonely room at the Hotel Kurrajong. Some MPs invested in small apartments. The mortgage would be covered by the Canberra travel allowance, and, at the end of their parliamentary life, they would sell up for a capital gain. Despite the capital-gains tax later introduced, financing apartment mortgages from the Canberra travel allowance is still a good deal. Billiards was a popular pastime at which Labor MPs of working-class background were the superior players.

The Parliamentary Library was and still is a wonderful resource for not only MPs but also journalists with a research bent. The newspaper room then and now has all the significant Australian newspapers available and an impressive collection of international English-language papers. The members' and non-members' dining rooms were the best eating establishments in Canberra. The menu was *à la carte*, there were white tablecloths and linen napkins with service by waitresses in crisp white uniforms. Subsidised by the takings from the non-members' bar, the dining rooms were well patronised and cheap. Because parliamentarians stayed in the Parliament during the sitting week, so would the journalists. At the end of the sitting week, the parliamentarians would go directly to the airport, each occupying a chauffeured government car (as they do today) and that was all they saw of Canberra.

Although the politicians did not see much of Canberra and did not get away from Parliament House, for ministerial staffers, parliamentary staff and public servants, Canberra was home. It was not regarded as a hardship post, although for many years it was so regarded by the Government. The residents of Canberra from the 1920s certainly up to the 1960s had their nature strips mowed by the Parks and Gardens Branch of the Interior Department and every new resident was entitled to a generous free handout of shrubs and trees for their gardens from the Government Nursery. The Interior Department provided cheap rental housing, which could be purchased at the low interest rate applying to the returned servicemen and women's housing schemes.

In his masterful small book *Parliament and the Press*, C. J. (Clem) Lloyd chronicled the tenuous position of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery from its establishment in 1901 until 1988. I have drawn extensively on Lloyd's book. Clem was an interesting character, a member of the gallery and later a staffer to Labor politicians, before beginning a distinguished career in academia. For many years, he was a member of a Friday luncheon group, of which I was also a member, together with a half-dozen or more characters such as Mungo

MacCallum, Eric Walsh, Russell Parkes and Alan Wood. When the Whitlam Government came to power, Lloyd was involved in a power struggle with the lofty mandarin Sir Arthur Tange, who headed the Defence Department (see Chapter 14). In the first chapter of his book, Lloyd quotes Sir Alan Turner, former Clerk of the House of Representatives:

The [Press] Gallery seems to be here because it is here. The Federal Gallery probably inherited the status and privileges of the Victorian, when Federal Parliament occupied the State Parliament building in Melbourne. And I suppose the State Gallery simply carried on the tradition of the House of Commons when the Victorian Parliament was formed on the Westminster mode. The gallery has no formal right to exist and it owes its privileges and access to the chambers of the House of Representatives and the Senate and to its occupancy of rooms in the Parliament entirely to practice and tradition.

There has inevitably been tension between parliamentarians and the gallery. In the long history of Westminster parliaments, a minority of MPs loathed journalists. The majority of MPs, however, regard the gallery as part of the Parliament and recognise its vital function of informing Australia and the world of the work of the Parliament, the executive government and the opposition. Nevertheless, a breach of privilege—real or perceived—is something that has to be guarded against by members of the gallery. Even though rent is paid for the occupancy of offices in the gallery in the present Parliament House, this does not guarantee access or tenure.

The Speaker and the President of the Senate may eject any member of the gallery from the premises temporarily or permanently. Claims of breach of privilege against journalists produced some notable struggles between the Parliament and the press. Lloyd recounts an event in 1942 when Richard Hughes (later to have a distinguished career as a foreign correspondent) launched in *The Daily Telegraph* a colourful attack on the Senate and senators for rejecting a regulation to lift a ban on the sale of beef from the sewage farm at Werribee in Victoria. The ban had been applied when it was claimed tapeworm disease could be contracted from this beef. The ban was to be lifted as an urgent wartime measure. The President of the Senate, Senator Cunningham, described the article as a ‘deliberate attempt by the newspaper concerned to discredit the Senate in the regard of the people and bring it into contempt’.

The Senate voted to expel the four representatives of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph* from Parliament House. An apology was sought from the proprietor, Frank Packer, without success. House Speaker Nairn applied a similar ban of his own volition, despite the article not reflecting on him. Nor did he seek the advice of the Clerk of the House, the legendary Frank Green—a friend

of Hughes—who believed only the house could deal with alleged breaches of privilege. The offenders from *The Daily Telegraph* established themselves in the nearby Hotel Canberra, where they were supplied with sufficient material from gallery colleagues and Frank Green to continue reporting the parliamentary proceedings and the doings of the executive government. The deadlock continued for four months until Packer assured Cunningham that Hughes had not meant to disparage senators or the Senate (though he clearly did).

The *Mirror*, like other papers represented in the press gallery, sent a small team of journalists to Canberra to help the permanently stationed journalists handle reporting Parliament when it was in session. This was a major undertaking and each paper devoted a lot of attention to Question Time and debates in the Parliament. Newspapers from the smaller States tended to focus their attention on parochial issues. For example, the Brisbane morning paper, *The Courier-Mail*, and the afternoon paper, *The Telegraph*, concentrated generally on debates or questions relating to Brisbane and Queensland. Similarly, Adelaide's *Advertiser* and the afternoon paper, the *News*, gave a lot of attention to SA issues. Until the 1970s, the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA) had resolutely fought attempts by the newspaper proprietors to syndicate the coverage of parliamentary proceedings to all newspapers and the ABC through the services of Australian Associated Press (AAP).

Not all proprietors were in favour. Ezra Norton, proprietor of the *Daily Mirror*, insisted on retaining his independent gallery staff for both chambers. The proprietors kept up the pressure and finally the AJA ended its resistance. In the early 1970s, AAP opened its own bureau in Canberra, providing coverage not only of parliamentary proceedings but also of political and departmental news. I met Kevin Power when the *Mirror* reinforcements for the 1951 autumn session arrived at the *Mirror's* Parliament House office, which consisted of just two rooms. Power was known in the gallery as 'Kewpie', no doubt because he resembled a Kewpie doll: short and dumpy with a shiny, round face. He was the headman of the *Mirror* and Les Love ('the Lapper'), who turned out to be quite a character, was his number two.

Between the two of them and the sessional staff, we covered not only the Parliament, but also the whole of Federal Government activities. Neither Kewpie nor the Lapper gave the newcomers to the *Mirror's* gallery office an introduction to anyone, not even the Prime Minister's press secretary, let alone their much-cherished contacts on both sides of the Parliament and in the Public Service. We had to make our own way. Apart from Menzies, Country Party leader, Artie Fadden, and, for some curious reason, Sir Wilfred Kent Hughes, who was Minister for the Interior and, in effect, ran Canberra, ministers did not have press secretaries.

The ministers had to handle the press themselves—a great way for junior reporters to get to know them. Unlike present-day ministers, they were not shielded by spin doctors, and ministers such as Harold Holt were adept at press relations and knew nearly everyone in the gallery on first-name terms. I got to know Holt very well. Ezra Norton was a racist—as so many Australians were at the time—and appeared to have a particular aversion to Chinese. Kevin Power would receive instructions from the news editor to ask Holt, as Immigration Minister, why a certain Chinese cook or waiter in Sydney's Chinatown should not be deported. Power avoided doing this himself and frequently passed the query on to me. I was well known to Holt's staff and would be ushered into Holt's office to put the nasty racist query directly to him. He would not enter into a debate about the issue, undertaking to inquire. That got me off the hook. Frequently, we heard no more about the matter from our Sydney office.

In a reflective mood one morning after my mission to have another Chinese deported, Holt told me of the efforts to end his political career by Sir Keith Murdoch, when he was head of *The Herald and Weekly Times* newspaper empire. Holt enlisted in the Second AIF in May 1940 and, as a former Acting Air Minister, he was offered a senior commission in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). He sought no favours and preferred to be a private soldier.<sup>3</sup> He was nearing the end of his artillery training at Puckapunyal, Victoria, and was preparing to depart for the Middle East when tragedy intervened.

On the morning of 13 August 1940, a RAAF plane crashed just beyond Canberra airport, killing all passengers and crew, including Minister for the Army, Sir Henry Gullett, Minister for Civil Aviation and Air, James Fairbairn, and Brigadier Geoffrey Street, Vice-President of the Executive Council. (The site is marked by a plaque in a pine forest at the southern edge of the airport.) Prime Minister Menzies appealed to Holt to leave the Army and return to the Cabinet, where he was now sorely needed. Holt agreed. He won his seat of Fawkner in the September 1940 election and the Government was returned, but only because of the support of the two Victorian independents, Arthur Coles (founder of the G. J. Coles retail empire) and Alex Wilson. His colleagues in 1941 dumped Menzies, and Arthur Fadden, leader of the Country Party, became Prime Minister. His government staggered on for just more than a month before Curtin became Prime Minister when the two independents crossed the floor against Fadden to support Labor.

Out of government, Holt considered re-enlisting, but decided against it. As the 1943 election neared, there were rumours Holt was under pressure to stand aside for Murdoch. Nothing came of this but Holt told me Murdoch had put up an independent against him in Fawkner. This was William Edward Cremor, who

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<sup>3</sup> Frame, Tom 2005, *The Life and Death of Harold Holt*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, p. 20.

served in World War I and World War II as a lieutenant colonel in the Middle East and led his regiment in the Greece and Crete campaigns. The obvious motivation of Murdoch (a notable war correspondent in the First War) was to provide an independent with a notable war record—in contrast with Holt's brief army experience. Cremor, backed by Murdoch, polled well in the election, with 15 958 votes, reducing Holt's primary vote to 23 931, yet Holt won easily when preferences were distributed.

Holt told me, with considerable passion, he would support the continuing broadcasting of Parliament even if it had only one listener. He had certainly changed his views on parliamentary broadcasts, which were introduced in 1942. According to Tom Frame,<sup>4</sup> Holt initially opposed their introduction, saying it would encourage politicians to grandstand and prolong parliamentary proceedings. The broadcasts remain popular today. For many years, the supervision of absolute fairness of parliamentary broadcasting was absurdly restrictive on the team of experienced radio announcers. When a division was being counted and the result of the division announced, nothing went to air. All the listeners could hear was the background noise of papers being shuffled and faint voices away from the microphones on the floor of the chamber. Later presenters of the broadcast explained what a particular division was about, what business had taken place and what was coming up. ABC news items are broadcast to fill in the silence.

One of the gallery traditions was the morning round. Each morning, we were given a list of queries, which *The Mirror* office in Sydney had for stories. About 9 am, journalists—mainly representatives of the afternoon newspapers—gathered in the press gallery; frequently, others from the evening papers would join in. We would agree on which ministers we would visit and what queries we had and then we would set off. We would see seven, eight or nine ministers in any one morning. On our arrival at a minister's office, the minister's secretary would go into the boss's office with the statement: 'The press is here, Sir.' Rarely were we refused. We were then ushered into the minister's office where he was asked what he was going to do about this or that. Josh Francis, the blustering Minister for the Army, was one who was frequently asked to answer questions. As ever, one way or another, the Army would frequently have some sort of stuff-up—someone would drown or guns would go off accidentally, wounding or killing someone. Asked why these events happened and what was being done about it, Josh had the perfect comment: 'I'll have an immediate inquiry.' Satisfied, we would go on to the next minister.

A serious weekly chore was filling in the expenses claim—otherwise known as the 'swindle sheet'; the funds thus acquired would help defray the substantial

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

costs of alcohol consumption. Using whatever cunning we had, we worked the swindle sheet to the maximum, doubling the actual laundry costs, falsifying taxi fares, and it was amazing how many MPs were allegedly entertained at lunch by the *Mirror* staff. It was flagrant theft. These sheets had to be OK'd by Kewpie Power before dispatching them to Sydney. Kewpie did not have much argument with our claims because, as he was rorting the system himself, we were all in the same boat.

When I arrived in Canberra, the leading journalists in the press gallery were Harold Cox (Melbourne's *Herald*), Kevin Power (*Daily Mirror*), Alan Reid (Sydney's *Sun*), and Leo McDonald (Brisbane's *Telegraph*)—all afternoon papers. The evening papers were represented by Frank Chamberlain (*The Sun News Pictorial*, Melbourne), Ian Fitchett (*The Age*), Ray Maley (*The Argus*, Melbourne), Ken Schapel (*The Daily Telegraph*), plus Jack Commons of the ABC, Jack Allsop of the Australian United Press (AUP), Stan Stevens (Adelaide's *The Advertiser*) and Oliver Hogue (Sydney's *Sunday Sun*). There were no representatives from the *West Australian*, Perth's *Daily News* or *The News* of Adelaide. The majority of the 42 journalists who then made up the gallery in that year did not hold university degrees.

All the journalists in the gallery were members of the AJA, the journalists' union, and there were no photographers; casual outside photographers were hired for pictures. The gallery committee liased with the Parliament, the Government and the Opposition on matters such as access to various parts of the building, the Parliamentary Library and the newspaper room. The other important group was the bureau heads—the journalists who headed the various bureaus. As representatives of the newspaper proprietors, they decided the most hotly contested of all issues in the gallery at the time: which organisations and individuals were allocated what space.

Ian Fitchett, smartly dressed, a Falstaffian figure, bureau head for *The Age* and later the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was one of the great gallery characters. A member of the Melbourne Cricket Club and from a well-known Victorian family, Fitchett had a law degree and had been a war correspondent. He had an acerbic, often cruel wit and was a first-class journalist with good contacts. Fitchett was also a snob and cruelly put down many of his contemporaries in the gallery. For example, he dubbed Eric Walsh, then heading the *Mirror* bureau and just as likely to turn up for work in a cardigan as a suit, as 'leader of the cardigan set'. Frank Chamberlain, an earnest journalist on *The Sun News Pictorial* and a successful radio commentator, was of somewhat dumpy appearance and had smooth skin; he was 'grease ball'. Fitchett was a member of the Victoria Racing Club (VRC), with its headquarters at the famous Flemington Racecourse. He came back from a Melbourne Cup meeting looking down in the mouth and I

asked him, 'How did you go, Fitch?' He replied, 'Bloody awful. Thank Christ I was too pissed to punt on the nod'—a reference to VRC members being able to book on credit with rails bookmakers adjoining the members' enclosure.

I am obliged to Graham Freudenberg<sup>5</sup> for the following wonderful story of a Fitchett joust with Menzies. Fitchett's grandfather, the Reverend W. H. Fitchett, founding Principal of the Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne, was also a noted author who extolled the deeds of Nelson, Wellington and Gordon. His most famous work, *Deeds that Won the Empire (1897)*, inspired Menzies, and Sir John Monash carried his copy to Gallipoli. At a press conference after Menzies' role in the Suez fiasco, Menzies took to Fitchett over a piece he had written in *The Age*. Said Menzies: 'You may fancy yourself as a journalist, but you will never write anything as good as your grandfather's *Deeds that Won the Empire*.' 'No', huffed Fitchett, 'but I'm working on the sequel: *Deeds that Lost the Empire*'.

In the non-members' bar one night, Fitchett was holding forth on the Tasmanian Liberal Senator Peter Rae, an ambitious young man who was chairing a senate committee inquiry into Australian capital markets, particularly stock exchanges, at the height of the Poseidon boom. Rae was always trying to squeeze the maximum publicity from this exercise. In the drinking group was psephologist Malcolm Mackerras, who could go on for hours dissecting election statistics in every seat in Australia, hence Fitchett referred to him as 'an algebraic arsehole'. Fitchett was denouncing Rae as a mug and Mackerras broke in: 'No, Fitchett, he is quite a smart operator. I went to university with him in Hobart.' Fitchett pondered this for a second or so before his response: 'Oh, he may be Hobart smart.' From then on, among the young cognoscenti of the non-members' bar, a reference to anyone as 'a bit Hobart' meant not smart at all.

Menzies held press conferences in his office, which heads of the press gallery bureaus attended. Because there were no methods of recording these conferences, the bureau heads would be accompanied by a junior to take notes. The latter were somewhat derisively referred to as 'pencillers'. Following the death of Churchill, in January 1965, Menzies was immensely honoured by the British Labour Government of Harold Wilson putting forward his name, to the Queen, as the successor to Churchill as Warden of the Cinque Ports. The five towns of the Cinque Ports were Hastings, Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich, covering a stretch of the English coast closest to the Continent and the landing place for almost every invasion since Neolithic times. This wardenship was, for a number of centuries, one of the realm's key defence posts, to which the King made all appointments.

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5 Freudenberg, Graham 2005, *A Figure of Speech: A political memoir*, John Wiley & Sons, Milton, Qld, p. 20.

For a man with Menzies' veneration for tradition, to hold this post would be a great honour, especially when he was the immediate successor to Churchill. That it no longer had any practical significance was not, from Menzies' point of view, important.<sup>6</sup> Menzies called a press conference to discuss the honour bestowed upon him. It was made clear to us that we were not to ask questions other than those relating to the lord wardenship of the Cinque Ports. At the conference in his office, Menzies went on for some time about details, such as how he would handle the job, how he was entitled to wear an antique uniform and to a stake in Walmer Castle, built by Henry VIII. As the questions became more desultory, Ian Fitchett, who invariably sat at the back of the Prime Minister's office, interjected:

'Sir, will you be entitled to the flotsam and jetsam?'

Menzies: 'Yes, Fitchett.'

Fitchett: 'What about mermaids, Sir?'

Menzies: 'Yes, Fitchett.'

At this stage, the Australian ports were in the grip of a damaging wharfies' strike. As the conference wound down, Fitchett said to Menzies, 'Well, we've heard about your ports, Sir, what about our ports?' Menzies shot back: 'See the Minister for Transport about that, Fitchett.' Following his induction as Lord Warden, Menzies took to flying the Cinque Port flag on his official car.

Fitchett had an exclusive, leaked story in *The Age* of Cabinet discussions concerning splitting the Reserve Bank from the Commonwealth Bank. Menzies hated Cabinet leaks and warned his ministers about the need for absolute Cabinet confidentiality. Fitchett ran into Menzies in King's Hall on the morning *The Age* ran the story. Menzies said, 'I'll make you eat crow, Fitchett.' Fitchett replied: 'And I'll eat it, Sir, providing it's garnished with the sauce of your embarrassment.'

In the 1950s, the George Sorley variety show appeared a couple of times a year in a tent set up in a vacant paddock in Civic Centre. It was a popular, bawdy show. Any form of entertainment was very much appreciated at a time when there was nothing much on but the movies at Manuka and Civic and dances at the Albert Hall. On the death of George VI, Menzies made a major ministerial statement to the House of Representatives—a maudlin affair, dripping with pathos and bathos. At its conclusion, Menzies slumped into his chair and cradled his great, leonine head in his hands—a picture of despair. Fitchett, at this stage, rose from his seat in the press gallery, declaring, 'I can't stand any more of this. I've seen better acts under canvas at George Sorley's.'

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6 Martin, A. W. 1999, *Robert Menzies: A life. Volume 2: 1944–1978*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Helga Sundstrup (*The Daily Telegraph*) was the only woman in the gallery and the first stationed on a permanent basis. She joined us in the morning-round calls on ministers. She was married to Bernie Freedman, then on *The Argus* in the gallery and later to have a long and successful career in the public relations section of the Immigration Department. When the new Parliament House opened in 1988, Bernie, who had retired from the Public Service, returned to the gallery as the representative of *The Jewish News*. He retired from that role in 2005. Nowadays, there would be at least as many female journalists in the gallery as men and not just in junior positions. For example, at one stage about 2005–06, three women headed the three Fairfax bureaus: Michelle Grattan (*The Age*), Laura Tingle (*Australian Financial Review*) and Louise Dodson (*Sydney Morning Herald*). Grattan is the veteran among the women. She joined *The Age's* Canberra bureau in 1971, when the late Alan Barnes headed it; the legendary editor the late Graham Perkin appointed Michelle. Perkin had earlier served in *The Age* bureau under Ian Fitchett and knew what was needed in Canberra. Michelle has been at one time or another head of all the Fairfax bureaus and had a stint out of the gallery as editor of *The Canberra Times*.

Old Parliament House was already crowded in 1951 with the gallery absolutely chock-a-block; MPs shared small offices and ministers' offices were scattered all over the building. Despite the squeeze, the gallery maintained its common room, equipped with a table-tennis table. It was in this room that Archie Cameron, the Speaker of the day, climbed through a window from the roof and nabbed a poker school in action attended by Alan Reid and Oliver Hogue. They were given a severe dressing down as Cameron had brought down an edict that no gambling was allowed in Parliament House (or at least those parts under his direct control). He suspected the parliamentary barber, Cec Bainbrigg, was running the illegal SP book, but failed to get the evidence.

Cec cut the hair of all comers from Ben Chifley down. Cec would take our bets over the phone at his home on Saturday race day and come Monday morning was the settlement—mostly in Cec's favour. An unmarked envelope would appear in your mailbox setting out how much was owed, or hopefully won. Cec was in the news when Cameron ordered him to take down a magnificent picture of the champion horse Phar Lap from his barbershop wall. This made headlines all over Australia. Archie was a blue-nosed Presbyterian who converted to Catholicism, yet his conversion did not mean he abandoned his views of the sinfulness of gambling. He was an eccentric character and in the summer could be seen walking around the house in a Jackie Howe singlet, featuring the name of some champion shearer on the back.

At the centre of the gallery were 'the boxes'. Each bureau had a shelf space with the bureau name marked on it. Press releases from all over the house—government and opposition as well as from lobby groups—were deposited in

these boxes. Anyone putting a press release in the boxes pushed a button to ring an electric bell to alert the gallery to a new release. We were all one big family, though not always harmonious. Crowded together, we had to put up with cramped conditions. Journalists who work in busy newsrooms are accustomed to dealing with distractions, with lots of other people around, phones ringing, constant conversations, and activity everywhere. Hence, the crowded *Mirror* office in the gallery did not present a problem. When the house was sitting, many journalists—to get away from cramped offices—spent a lot of time in King’s Hall, which was one of the larger spaces in Parliament House. From here, one could watch the comings and goings of ministers and MPs. The library and the government and opposition lobbies ran off King’s Hall. Senators had to cross the space to attend party meetings.

The easy informality of relations between the gallery and parliamentarians existed until Parliament made the move to its permanent home on Capital Hill in 1988. This was illustrated by a story Don Whittington told me. Chifley, when in Canberra, lived in one room in the Hotel Kurrajong, close to Parliament House. When he became Prime Minister in July 1945, the Lodge was opened only when he had VIPs to entertain. He walked between Parliament House and the Kurrajong, often accompanied by other Caucus members, but just as often he would be alone, whether walking home at midnight or going to Parliament at 8 am. There was not a policeman or security officer in sight. Nobody thought anything about security until the Hilton Hotel bombing in Sydney in February 1978.

One frosty winter night, Jack Allsop (AUP) and his number-two, Les Teece, after a day’s work in the gallery, were about to climb into Teece’s bull-nosed Morris immediately outside the House of Representatives’ side entrance. At this moment, Chifley emerged from the side door of the building, which led directly from the Prime Minister’s office. The two journalists offered Chifley a lift; he accepted and climbed into the front passenger seat. The car refused to start and no matter how hard the crank handle was turned it would not go. Chifley then took the driver’s seat, pushing in the clutch while the two journalists pushed the car. ‘Let her out, Chif’, they yelled as they got up a bit of speed. Still no start. Then they had another go and another and another. In the end, they pushed the car all the way to the Kurrajong.

Question Time, regarded as the most lively event of a sitting day, began at 3 pm, with journalists reporting for 15-minute ‘takes’ before leaving the gallery to dictate a story over the phone to a copytaker, or via the telex machine linked directly to the Sydney office. Once the *Mirror* missed a story of an apple falling from a child’s hand in the public gallery onto the head of an MP in the house. Unfortunately, as the *Sun* featured it, our Sydney office demanded to know why we had missed the story. As bureau head, Kevin Power was anxious to

pin the blame on an underling. In the end, we all managed to wriggle out of responsibility. The probable reason was that this happened in the few seconds while the *Mirror* journalist had his eyes on his notebook and other gallery members around him had not realised he missed the incident.

Reporting Question Time and parliamentary debates was not easy, particularly if edition deadlines were tight and copy had to be produced in a hurry. Most of the older gallery journalists, who had not entered the newspaper business through a cadetship, had no shorthand. Mine, while not high speed, was enough to get down fairly sizeable chunks of direct quotes. The trick was to transcribe the notes immediately after leaving the chamber, while they were still fresh in the memory. Some journalists without shorthand simply wrote keywords in longhand, relying on their memory to then turn the words into sentences.

With more experience, I discovered a lot of background information and important leaks could be extracted from ministers and senior public servants by assuring them the material would not be attributed to them. I took no notes during these conversations, as the appearance of a notebook and pen would tighten up the information flow from your informant. Far better to appear relaxed, concentrate hard on what was being said, and, on departing, get down as much of the conversation as you could remember. Journalists then, as now, under no circumstances would attribute background material to the source. Apart from the ethics involved, to go back on an undertaking would dry up the source forever. Protecting the source is fundamental to reporting—investigative or otherwise. The only equipment we had for covering proceedings in the chamber was a notebook and a pen. For many years, it was forbidden to record parliamentary proceedings broadcast by the ABC, and we had no recording equipment to do so, even if we had wanted to. When small dictaphone machines did become a standard part of a reporter's gear, the gallery furtively recorded proceedings and could then check the accuracy of notes taken in the chamber.

When I first came to the gallery, Question Time produced more stories than it does now. The era of television and radio news and talkback shows has a far greater influence on politics. Ministers then could not get away with blatantly ducking questions because they did not like them, and the Standing Orders, as interpreted by speakers, required answers to be relevant to the question. Now an answer is considered relevant if the minister in reply at least uses a phrase from the question. For example, an opposition MP may ask a question on government policy on, say, industrial relations. The minister is then free to avoid answering the question asked and regale the house with a lecture on the faults of the Opposition's industrial relations policy. This certainly did not happen in Menzies' day, and probably not until the Parliament moved to the permanent Parliament House in 1988. Menzies, in particular, treated all questions put to him as requiring a reply.

The following Question Time exchange from 1956 gives the reader something of the flavour of Menzies' style and also of the problem of the shortage of space in the old parliamentary building. Note that the building of a permanent Parliament House is also raised:

Mr CLYDE CAMERON (Labor, SA): I direct my question to the Prime Minister. Is the right honourable gentleman aware of the fact that six members of the Liberal Party, six members of the Australian Country Party, and ten members of the Australian Labor Party are obliged to do all of their work in their respective party rooms because there is no separate accommodation available for their use? Does he know, also, that many of the honourable members who have office accommodation outside party rooms are crowded three to each small room, whilst most ministerial secretaries and typists are provided with rooms to themselves? Does he know that certain members on the Government side of the House recently were forced to take basement accommodation, because the accommodation previously occupied by them had been handed over to ministerial staff? Does he know that the secretary of the Opposition, and his secretary, have been forced to work in one tiny basement room instead of being given accommodation on the main floor level? Does he agree that Members of Parliament have stronger rights to Parliament House accommodation than have the members of ministerial staff? Is it a fact that in the days of the Bruce–Page Government and of the Scullin Government, only the Prime Minister had his office and staff situated in Parliament House? Finally, will the Prime Minister state what he intends to do about the suggestion that was put forward by the Leader of the Opposition that an all-party committee or body of inspection should be appointed at an early date to inspect the whole of the accommodation at Parliament House in order to ascertain at first-hand the amount of accommodation that is being monopolised by Ministers and their staffs, and the conditions under which members of Parliament have to do their work, with a view to taking steps to find accommodation for ministerial staffs, other than that which they are now monopolising in this building?

Mr MENZIES: It requires a singular feat of memory to remember all the bits in that question, but no doubt it will be in Hansard, and I can have a look at it. I quite agree that the problem of accommodation in this building is very serious, but when I look back to the time when I first came to this place 22 years ago, I recall that private members, badly off as they may be to-day, were much worse off then, because I do not recall that there was private room for any private member at all.

In 1952, I was instructed to interview William Morris Hughes, the former Prime Minister, who was usually interviewed on his birthday by one of our

more senior reporters, John O'Hara; on this occasion, however, the latter was away and I was not looking forward to the meeting. Hughes had a small office on the House of Representatives side of the building and I entered with great trepidation. There was this gnarled, gnome-like little figure, aged ninety, deaf as a post, but one of the giants in the history of Australian politics. He was born in Pimlico, England, founded the Australian Waterside Workers' Federation, and was a Labor wartime prime minister, until 1916, when he split the Australian Labor Party (ALP) because of his unsuccessful insistence that there should be conscription for service on the Western Front. Hughes formed a government by switching to the conservative side of politics, and was—and still is—regarded as the number-one Labor rat. Dubbed 'the Little Digger', Hughes toured the World War I battlefields, insisting on Australian control of Australian forces. He led the Australian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and secured an Australian mandate for New Guinea and other German colonies in the Pacific. Hughes was a remarkable and quick-witted orator, notable for his energy and often-unscrupulous opportunism.

As a former prime minister, he was entitled to a private secretary and he chewed these up at a great rate. His temper was more than even the strongest young men could handle over a protracted period as his secretary. One of his well-known quotes was: 'If there was an aristocracy of bastards, Menzies would be a prince.' My interview with Hughes did not go well. I found it difficult to get any humorous touches—the essence of the interviews O'Hara put together on each of Hughes' birthdays. It was a less than funny encounter. Worse still, Hughes insisted on editing my copy. This is a demand journalists should not agree to, but I was young and easily browbeaten by the great man. When I returned with the copy for Hughes' inspection, for some reason, this enraged him. He sat with the copy in front of him and angrily swept everything off his desk with his arm with a huge clatter. He scribbled furiously and finally said, throwing the copy at me: 'You wouldn't have done this to that bastard Menzies.' I hastened from his office and ignored the Hughes' editing. His funeral later that year was probably the biggest ever seen in Sydney until then, with tens of thousands of people lining the streets. Few who watched the coffin pass by would have known of his hatred for Menzies—then at the zenith of his political career.