

4. Menzies: The giant of Australian politics

Menzies' presence matched his political dominance: an imposing figure, he was tall, well proportioned, although with an ample girth, with a good head of greying hair, offset by jet-black, bushy eyebrows. And in 1951 he was a mere fifty-seven years of age. He was a born orator with a compelling, but never hectoring, style of delivery. The blue-rinse ladies of Sydney's North Shore and Melbourne's Toorak 'liked Mr Menzies because he spoke so nicely'. Menzies was the dominant figure in Australian politics in the twentieth century. He was Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, serving from April 1939 until August 1941 and then from December 1949 until January 1966. Above all, after World War II, he transformed the conservative side of politics—then uncoordinated and weak—into the most successful postwar political party.

Although the hero of conservatives, Menzies did not have many close friends outside Parliament. Many claimed to be his friend, yet Menzies did not spend much time with them. Jack O'Sullivan, a journalist of solid Irish-Catholic working-class stock, a big man, was responsible, in the days when few ministers had press secretaries, for promulgating ministerial press releases. Jack was a steady customer of the non-members' bar and at first glance he would not have seemed to have much in common with the erudite leader of Australian conservatives. Yet he told me he often spent time with Menzies at Kirribilli House—just the two of them. They both liked the corned beef served at Kirribilli House, and would spend hours together yarning and watching the ever-changing scene on Sydney Harbour. Menzies was also accompanied at Kirribilli by his press secretary, Hugh Dash, and later Tony Eggleton. The city's leading socialites would have feted Menzies on every visit to Sydney had he sought it. Unlike one of his successors, John Howard, Menzies was not interested in social gatherings and the adulation of the rich and famous. Menzies served a ministerial apprenticeship in the Victorian Parliament and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1934, going immediately into the Lyons United Australia Party (UAP) ministry. Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, who had been ill for some time and was exhausted (some said by the effort to stave off what he perceived as the prospect of a challenge from Menzies), died in April 1939. Earle Page was sworn in as Prime Minister, but announced he would step down for whomever the UAP elected as its leader. He added that if that leader was Menzies, the Coalition with the Country Party would end, and end it did. Menzies was not universally liked within the UAP. Certain members, including ministers, resented his sometimes overbearing manner and sharp wit, and during his absence abroad he received more than one warning of plots

against him. Some thought he lacked leadership skills; others maintained that he was unpopular in the electorate and that the Government could not carry its wartime responsibilities with him as head. After complex internal manoeuvres, and Labor's refusal to agree to the formation of a British-style national wartime government, Menzies had the galling experience of losing majority support in his own Cabinet. He resigned both the prime ministership and, later, the leadership of his party. 'It was the most humiliating personal collapse in the history of federal politics in Australia.'¹

Throughout his political career, Menzies was dogged by the slur of cowardice for failing to enlist in the AIF in World War I. It was claimed he had resigned his commission (he rose to the rank of lieutenant) in the Melbourne University Rifles during the war. For the facts on this, I rely on *Robert Menzies—A Life*.² Menzies was a member of the Rifles between 1915 and 1919 and served the necessary stint of compulsory military training required of his age group to provide a militia for the *domestic defence of Australia*. He did not resign his commission to avoid war service. He held his commission until his mandatory period of service was over. This still did not explain why he failed to enlist in the AIF, as had Menzies' two older brothers, Frank and Les, with their parents' approval. Frank later explained (in an oral history contribution to the National Library of Australia) that for the family to have two out of three boys at the front seemed 'a pretty good contribution'. It was decided one grown man was needed at home to stand by his parents, who were ageing, not well off and had just been through what they regarded as a trauma and a disgrace. They had lost their daughter, Belle, who eloped with a soldier 'deeply disapproved of' by other members of the family.

When Menzies was Prime Minister in 1939, the Country Party leader, Earle Page, subjected Menzies to a bitter attack in the house. Page had served on the Western Front as a doctor (his field instruments are on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra). Page told the Parliament that he and his party were no longer prepared to serve in a Menzies government and, with war threatening, he did not believe Menzies had the right attributes to bring about 'a united national effort'. Page said, based on Menzies' record, he had no confidence the Prime Minister had what was required: 'the maximum courage, or loyalty or judgments.' After numbering what he believed were faults in Menzies' record, he devoted particular attention to Menzies' war record. Page is responsible for fostering the falsehood—still widely held to be true—that Menzies resigned his commission. Page continued:

1 Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, pp. X11 and X111.

2 Martin, A. W. 1993, *Robert Menzies: A life. Volume 1: 1894–1943*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

I am not questioning the reasons why anyone did not go to war. All I say is that if the right honourable gentleman cannot satisfactorily and publicly explain to a very great body of people in Australia, who did participate in the war, his failure to do so, he will not be able to get that maximum effort out of the people in the event of war.

All this was greeted with cries of 'shame'. Menzies immediately replied and was heard in silence. On the charge of not serving in the war, there was real, if dignified, bitterness in Menzies' response. He said the charge was not a novelty and represented 'a stream of mud through which I have waded at every election campaign in which I have participated'. Menzies explained that on the issue of enlistment he had to answer the supremely important question '[i]s it my duty to go to the war or is it my duty not to go? The answer to that question is not one that can be made on a public platform.' Menzies went on to say the question related to 'a man's intimate and personal family affairs and in consequence, I, facing these problems of intense difficulty, found myself, for reasons which were and are compelling, unable to join my two brothers in the infantry with the A.I.F'. In the political uproar following the Page attack, two Queensland Country Party MPs, Arthur Fadden and Bernie Corser, disassociated themselves from Page's speech, saying that henceforth they would sit as independent Country Party members. (It is somewhat ironic that after Menzies resigned as Prime Minister with so many in his party room opposed to him, Fadden became Prime Minister.)

In 1949 Fadden became Country Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister to Menzies. During Menzies' second period as Prime Minister, it was not unusual for Labor MPs to attack Menzies' military record. I was in the house when Eddie Ward, the Member for East Sydney (who was frequently referred to in the writings of gallery journalists as a 'Labor firebrand'), dredged up the Melbourne University Rifles falsehood and attacked the Government for not providing sufficient funds for defence. Sir Wilfred Kent Hughes (a Rhodes Scholar who had served in both wars and was a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese in the Second) rose to speak. Kent Hughes, who once saw himself as a rival to Menzies, came to the latter's defence. He attacked Ward and questioned what he would know about defence. 'The Member for East Sydney has never even learned to stand to attention,' said Kent Hughes. Like a flash, Ward interjected: 'The Prime Minister has learned to stand to attention, but he never learned to charge.'

Another cross Menzies carried was the sneering reference to him as 'Pig-Iron Bob'. (Again, I rely on much of the work of Martin.) In late 1938, waterside workers at Port Kembla, NSW, refused to load the steamer *Dalfram* with pig-iron produced in the BHP blast furnaces. Tom Roach, the union secretary, explained that pig-iron should not be sent to Japan because 'success to the Japanese Fascist militarists in China will, according to their own statements, inspire them

to further attacks on peaceful people, which will include Australia'. This turned out to be remarkably prescient. Menzies, as Attorney-General, received Cabinet endorsement to use the *Transport Workers Act*, passed by the Bruce–Page Government in 1929—the so-called 'dog-collar act', much hated by unions. This required workers on the wharves to receive a licence and, as anyone could apply, it obviously encouraged 'scab' labour. Menzies said the issue was not whether the shipment of pig-iron was right or wrong, but rather preventing Australian foreign policy being set by industrial action. (John Howard, who years later in his WorkChoices legislation outlawed political strikes and, indeed, made a strike for any reason difficult, would approve of this.)

The Menzies Government's position was dubious. It had banned the export of iron ore because of what were then considered limited deposits in Australia. Yet it was prepared to export the more valuable product of pig-iron to Japan—after the Rape of Nanking. Menzies showed courage in agreeing to visit Wollongong at the invitation of the Labor MP for the area, Bert Lazzarini, to confer with union officials. Some 4000 South Coast miners went on strike for the day and thousands of men and women lined the streets from Bulli Pass to Wollongong waving anti-Menzies placards and hissing as his car went past. By mid-January, BHP had closed its Port Kembla plant because its products could not be dispatched and some 7000 people were out of work. Menzies met the unions in the town hall for discussions, achieving nothing. There was no violence on the day. Martin believed union infighting did not help settlement of the dispute. It finally ended on 21 January after Menzies offered to lift the 'dog-collar act' and agreed to talks with the union on future government policy relating to exports.

More than two decades later, the Pig-Iron Bob label meant Menzies' sensitivity impeded the abolition of the longstanding ban on iron-ore exports. The ban was imposed because it was believed the nation had only limited reserves of iron ore. Yet following discoveries by Lang Hancock in the Pilbara of high-quality iron ore, other vast deposits came to light. Harold Raggatt (later Sir Harold), the head of the Department of National Development, was the key to lifting Menzies' persecution complex about the Pig-Iron Bob tag. Bill Spooner, Minister for National Development, was a major power in the NSW branch of the Liberal Party and unsuccessfully contested the deputy leadership of the Liberals against Harold Holt. He was tall, bulky, slow moving—a menacing figure. Raggatt sent Spooner a ministerial minute giving detailed information about iron-ore production, consumption in Australia and the bright outlook for exploration, proving Australia had an enormous resource. Raggatt's aim was to persuade Menzies to lift the export embargo. Raggatt told me Menzies was resisting because it brought back unpleasant memories of the Pig-Iron Bob tag. The cautious Spooner scribbled a note on Raggatt's minute—'Who says?'—and returned it to his departmental head. Raggatt returned the minute to Spooner

and, under the minister's note, he had carefully written: 'See page — of *Who's Who*.' On turning to this page, Spooner discovered it was Raggatt's entry, listing his impressive technical expertise as a geologist. This ended correspondence on this particular Raggatt minute. The ban was lifted.

Spooner had a habit, when interviewing senior officials in his Parliament House office, of swivelling on his office chair and gazing out the window. One meeting included the then head of Treasury, Roland Wilson. Raggatt told the author that, after this meeting, Wilson told Raggatt he used to think Spooner was thinking when he gazed out the window, but Wilson no longer believed this. He was, said Wilson, 'just...just...err...just looking out the window'. Raggatt deserves the praise of later generations for winning the argument to export iron ore.

William Charles Wentworth, who represented the Sydney seat of Mackellar, was one of the most interesting of the 1949 Liberal recruits. He had inherited a considerable chunk of the fortune of the redoubtable capitalist and legislator of the nineteenth century in colonial Sydney, the first William Charles Wentworth. The Wentworth family home, Vacluse House, at Watsons Bay in Sydney, is a popular tourist spot. The first William Charles Wentworth was born on Norfolk Island, the son of D'Arcy Wentworth and a convict mother. D'Arcy Wentworth came to Sydney, made a fortune, became a large landowner and conducted a long-running feud with Governor William Bligh. Wentworth supported the Rum Rebellion and was finally acquitted on charges and restored to his position. Regarded by many of his colleagues as an eccentric, Bill Wentworth MHR was a foaming-at-the-mouth anti-communist who bridled at Menzies alone deciding who should be a minister. In founding the Liberal Party, Menzies was careful to ensure that all power resided in the parliamentary leader of the party. In government, Menzies, as leader of the parliamentary Liberal Party, selected the Liberal MPs for the ministry and allocated their portfolios. Wentworth sought to follow the Labor tradition of the party room electing ministers to the ministry and led an unsuccessful party-room revolt against Menzies' despotism. Wentworth received no promotion while Menzies was leader.

Wentworth, a backbencher and a rebel, was viewed by most of his colleagues as a genuine eccentric—fixated by his fervent pursuit of all things communist. At the same time, he was a determined and capable MP. It was no small thing that he persuaded the Parliament to lift its game on the frequency of publication of Hansard—then in a bound edition once a week. Wentworth led a committee that managed to convince Menzies there should be a daily copy of Hansard available each morning on the day after a sitting. This is still a valuable tool for all those who work in Parliament, particularly the media. Wentworth's greatest gift to Australia was to preside over a committee that recommended the standardisation of railway gauges in Australia. Colonial governments had been unable to agree on a standard gauge for the nation in the 1800s. In Victoria

the gauge was 5 ft 3 in (1600 mm), in New South Wales it was the British or standard gauge of 4 ft 8.5 in (1435 mm) and in Queensland, 3 ft 6 in (1067 mm). On the busy Sydney to Melbourne line, passengers had to disembark at Albury to change trains. The movement of freight was even more tedious.

As a result of Wentworth's determination, we now have a standard-gauge railway running from Brisbane through Sydney to Melbourne and from Melbourne to Adelaide and on to Perth as well as a link running from Sydney through Broken Hill and joining the standard gauge at Adelaide. Menzies believed Wentworth was far too erratic for a portfolio, but finally, in the Gorton Government, Wentworth was appointed Minister for Social Services and Minister in Charge of Aboriginal Affairs. He was the first federal minister with direct responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs and is now highly regarded for his groundbreaking work to bring the plight of Aborigines into political discussion. He spent many months each year visiting Aboriginal settlements and missions throughout Australia and particularly in northern Australia. Mungo MacCallum, a senior gallery journalist, was a nephew of Bill Wentworth and had a political bent well to the left of his uncle.

When uranium was discovered in the Northern Territory, Wentworth believed this would be worth a fortune for Australia and, when interviewed by Oliver Hogue for the *Sunday Sun*, he declared that uranium would outstrip wool as Australia's top export (all these years later, uranium still has a long way to go to equal wool exports). Wentworth pestered Menzies to allow him to question Harold Raggatt, head of the National Development Department, about what was being done to hasten the development of uranium mining. Raggatt had played a significant role in the development and encouragement of the oil search industry in Australia. Menzies finally agreed to allow Wentworth to question Raggatt at a Cabinet meeting on the pace of development of the uranium industry. Raggatt told me of the encounter. In the Cabinet room, Wentworth demanded to know how many exploratory shafts were being dug in the Northern Territory and Raggatt gave him an approximate number. Then he wanted to know how many men were digging each shaft. Raggatt replied, 'Well, only two; they are digging them with pick axes.' Wentworth demanded to know why there were not four men down each shaft. Raggatt answered coolly: 'Mr Wentworth, how would you stop them shoving the pick axes up one another's arses?' At this stage, Menzies said, 'Well, that will do Mr Wentworth'.

For the gallery, 1951 was a very big year, with the High Court decision in March by a majority of six to one rejecting Menzies' legislation to dissolve the Communist Party of Australia. Then came the double-dissolution election of 28 April 1951, an election that followed the Labor majority in the Senate blocking banking legislation. To the disappointment of Labor leader, H. V. Evatt, the Governor-General, Sir William McKell (former Labor Premier of New South Wales, whose

appointment to the job by the Chifley Government was denounced by Menzies), gave the Prime Minister his double-dissolution election. The outcome was a loss of five seats by the Government but it still finished with a handsome 17-seat majority. Menzies decided to hold a referendum to give the Government power—denied it by the High Court—to dissolve the Communist Party. There was no stomach within the State Labor parties to resist the referendum, coming after the April election. Evatt fought for the ‘no’ case single-handedly and ‘no’ won narrowly with 50.56 per cent of the total vote and three of the six States—New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia—returning a ‘no’-vote majority.

The death of Ben Chifley, a former engine driver, in his room at the Kurrajong Hotel marked the end of an era, when Labor had a powerful connection to working men and women and many of the ALP’s top politicians came from the shop floor. The Commonwealth Jubilee Celebrations were also in 1951, culminating in a state dinner at Parliament House on 12 June, which was attended by Chifley, although he was not well. Chifley did not attend the state ball held the next night in King’s Hall. About midnight, Menzies called for silence and solemnly announced the death of Chifley to the assembled guests. The ball ended at that point and people silently made their way out of the building. I was staying at the Civic Hotel that night and was awoken by *Mirror* colleague John O’Hara, who shared a room with me. John, like Chifley, was a Bathurst boy and, between sobs, he told me of Chifley’s death. Chifley’s body lay in state in King’s Hall for some days, before the state funeral in Bathurst.

Apart from the busy year of 1951, a rush of news did not particularly overstretch the gallery for some years. Despite the failure of Menzies to ban the Communist Party of Australia, it was still a background issue to the continuing Cold War. The power of the communists in the unions was linked to damaging strikes, involving communist-led unions. Inflation and unemployment—measures of the Government’s ability to manage the economy—were not big issues. The economy was given nothing like the prominence it is now afforded in the media. Neither Menzies nor Evatt was particularly noted for their grip on basic economics, nor were most members of the gallery tutored in the ‘dark arts’. National development, such as the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and other major government projects, was regarded as a worthy objective and a lot of Hansard space was devoted to it.

Menzies, like all top politicians, was keenly aware of the importance of the media. When he was opposition leader, Menzies was greatly impressed by the legendary Don Rogers, press secretary to both Curtin and Chifley, and anxiously sought to recruit someone to match him. This turned out to be a mate of Don Whittington (who later was my business partner), Charles Meeking, whom I got to know well. Compared with the television era, at that time, press conferences were rare. In the mid-1950s, Menzies’ press conferences were perhaps monthly

at most. If Menzies, Chifley, Evatt or any of the leading figures on either side of the Parliament wanted to speak to citizens, they would go into the house to say what they wanted to say. The newspapers extensively reported parliamentary debates and the standing of an MP had much to do with the standard of his or her oratory and debating skills in the chamber. Most MPs had considerable public-speaking experience before they entered Parliament.

Labor MPs in particular—the majority with a union background—were well versed in debating and politics before they stood for preselection for a seat. Because of the strain on office accommodation for MPs in the provisional Parliament House, they spent little time in the office—normally shared with at least one other MP. Parliamentary committee work was not nearly as intense as it is today. Many filled in time sitting comfortably in their place in the chamber listening to debates. Ministers would also attend interesting debates, or listen to the contributions of the more eloquent backbenchers from their side of the house. There were impressive orators on both sides of the house—none excelling Menzies, although Whitlam and Kim Beazley sr were his equals.

The standard of oratory and debate in the Parliament in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s far exceeded the standards achieved in the past several decades. Menzies would sometimes leave his office—only a few steps away from the side entrance into the chamber from the government lobby—to listen to debates. The Prime Minister often would come into the chamber to listen to the Labor Member for West Sydney, Danny Minogue. Born in County Clare, Ireland, and educated in the Emerald Isle, Minogue possessed a wonderful Irish brogue, which Menzies found delightful. Minogue invariably used debates to berate the Government for its meanness to the ‘poor pinchers’. Albert Thompson, the Labor MP for Port Adelaide (1949–63), was a senior Salvation Army officer and in the Caucus had picked up some colourful additions to his vocabulary. In one of his budget speeches, he declared with considerable fervour: ‘Mr Speaker, if this Budget is not defeated, this country will be rooted.’ The Speaker wisely decided not to pull Albert up for unparliamentary language, conscious that the Salvo did not understand its meaning.

Thompson also had the misfortune to share a two-seat bench in the house with former coalminer and colourful character Rowley James, who held the seat of Hunter (in the Newcastle area) for 30 years from his election in 1928. Rowley was a large, rotund figure, and one could observe from the press gallery Rowley’s habit of leaning on one cheek of his arse to let go a roaring fart in Thompson’s direction. Albert would lean as far as he could into the corridor alongside him to escape the noxious gas. Following one of James’s louder farts, Eddie Ward was on his feet taking a point of order: ‘Did Hansard record the Member for Hunter’s interjection?’ he asked. Rowley would take his walking stick into the chamber and was known to pound it on his desk in anger at contributions from the other

side of house. Speaking in the debate on Arthur Fadden's 1951 'horror' budget, Rowley roared, 'This is a bludger's budget! It taxes pessaries and condoms', emphasising his point with a whack of his stick on his desk. Rowley's son, Bert, followed him into the seat in 1960 and held it for 20 years.

Menzies—rather than is the practice today of ministers commenting on policy issues in answer to Dorothy Dixers—would make a ministerial statement in the house. He would carpet any minister who made any sort of press release or comment about a new policy initiative outside the Parliament. The Opposition was keen to have parliamentary statements made by ministers since the issues could then be debated. Although press conferences were somewhat irregular, Don Whittington told me that during the war, Curtin would regularly hold two press conferences a day—one for the morning papers and one for the afternoon editions. These were subject to heavy wartime censorship and what appeared in newspapers from the Curtin press conferences was what the Government allowed to be printed. Curtin used the press conferences as a conduit to keep the newspaper proprietors up-to-date with developments in the war. Journalists at these conferences made extensive private reports not subject to censorship to their proprietors.

Melbourne for a time became the wartime capital of Australia. US General Douglas MacArthur, after a perilous journey, arrived in Melbourne on 21 March 1942 and set up his headquarters. He met Prime Minister, John Curtin, in Parliament House, Canberra, five days later—six weeks after the fall of Singapore and the subsequent Japanese air raids on Darwin, the occupation of Java and the first attacks on New Guinea. In a press statement released on 16 February, Curtin had described the fall of Singapore as 'Australia's "Dunkirk", which opens the battle for Australia'. War historian Paul Hasluck (later senior minister and Governor-General) described the meeting as having 'the air from the start of being one of the fateful meetings of history'. It was reported that at the Canberra meeting MacArthur assured Curtin, 'Mr Prime Minister, you and I will see this thing through together' and '[y]ou take care of the rear and I will take care of the front'.³

From then on, Cabinet met mainly in Melbourne. All the departments relevant to the war—Defence, Army, Air, Navy, Supply, Munitions, Aircraft Production and War Organisation of Industry—were in Melbourne. When a Cabinet meeting was called for Melbourne, there was an exodus from Canberra. Ministers, their staff, senior bureaucrats and gallery bureau heads were driven to Yass Junction, where they picked up the Sydney–Melbourne train. Much of the night was occupied with drinking and playing cards, interrupted at Albury for the change of trains. The 40-minute jet flights between Canberra and Tullamarine were

³ Essay by David Black.

decades away. Until reliable airline services began, MPs travelled by train from all over Australia to Canberra for sittings of the Parliament, as they had when the Parliament was in Melbourne before 1927.

In my first year in the gallery, I was introduced to the budget lock-up—an arrangement allowing journalists, on an embargo basis, access to the budget documents in the afternoon before the budget was brought down in the Parliament. An embargo prohibits material supplied in advance being published before a time and date stipulated by the provider of the material. Only for the budget is the embargo taken to an extreme of journalists being given copies of the budget documents in a room they cannot leave until the Treasurer stands in the house to introduce the budget that evening. In the Old Parliament House, the lock-up was conducted from about 2pm in a couple of relatively small committee rooms on the Senate side of the Parliament. The lock-ups were, and still are, watched over by Treasury officials, who also give technical advice on the meaning of the documents, or where various bits of information a journalist might be after can be found in the pile of budget papers. In the old Parliament, Treasury officials even accompanied journalists to the lavatory to ensure no budget details leaked out (no pun intended). In the permanent Parliament House, there are lavatories located within the lock-up areas.

Originally, all this secrecy was to prevent budget decisions leaking in advance of the Australian stock exchanges closing. According to Don Whittington, the lock-up was an initiative of the gallery when Chifley was Treasurer. He made his budget speech at 8 pm in the house and the budget papers were not supplied until then. This meant a frantic rush to get the details into the first editions of the morning papers. The gallery pleaded for more time and the lock-up procedure began. Subeditors are in the lock-up to subedit copy, make up pages and, with the magic of electronics, the pages can be shot to distant newspaper offices with the touch of a button. With the arrival of globalisation, the excuse that the lock-up is to avoid stock-exchange fiddles no longer applies. There are exchanges open around the world and investors can buy or sell at any hour of the day or night by email. The secrecy is all the more absurd given that the Government deliberately leaks details of the budget to the media in advance of its presentation to Parliament. The aim is to generate interest in its contents well in advance of its presentation to Parliament.

Treasurer Paul Keating introduced another dodge: holding a press conference in the lock-up about 5 pm so that the captive audience would have pro-budget propaganda sold to them hours in advance of it coming down in the Parliament. Journalists could not get adverse comments on the budget from interest groups until the Treasurer began his speech. The lock-up is now unnecessary and exists merely to allow the Government of the day to have some control over its presentation to voters via the media.

Budget papers have become more impenetrable over the years. When I first went to lock-ups, what the Government had done with taxpayers' money the previous year and the details of what it proposed to spend in the coming year were quite clear. This is no longer the case.

In 2005 the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) mounted a High Court case arguing the passage of appropriation bills authorising government spending was unconstitutional in relation to expenditure. It claimed the Government had not made clear, as was required by law, the funds it proposed spending on advertising supporting its proposed industrial relations legislation, WorkChoices. The appropriation bills of the Howard Government frequently did not reveal even outlines of how much it was spending in various areas. The High Court rejected the challenge, in effect ruling it was an issue Parliament needed to sort out. There was ample precedent for this approach. The High Court is happy to rule whether or not the substance of legislation is constitutional, but it rarely seeks to tell the Parliament how to go about the legislative process. The appropriation bills in the Labor Government's first budget in 2008 were not much better.

Menzies did not provide Christmas drinks for the gallery at the Lodge. From Malcolm Fraser's time on, prime ministers played host to a crowd of 100 or so gallery members who turned up for the free drinks and finger food, all provided by the taxpayer. In Menzies' day, such largesse was not so freely used. He did have Christmas drinks for the heads of bureaus in the cabinet anteroom. They were, however, served martinis mixed by the Prime Minister's own hand. How the martinis went down with a group of beer drinkers I never discovered. In the Menzies Cabinet and for some years after his retirement, ministers made financial contributions from their own pocket to the cabinet liquor store. Hubert Opperman, a teetotaler, objected to this although it was pointed out to him that he and other ministers could invite guests for a drink in the cabinet anteroom. Taxpayers have footed the bill on and off for cabinet liquor. Menzies and all prime ministers before him were required to pay for food, right down to milk, bread and liquor for the Lodge. Fraser, as Prime Minister, changed the system and taxpayers paid for cabinet drinks. Certainly, in the Hawke and Keating Governments, ministers were required to make a contribution to the cabinet bar. When Howard made Kirribilli House his home, taxpayers were required to provide food and liquor at both the Lodge and Kirribilli House, plus extensive renovations at the latter.

Menzies had reasonable relations with the senior gallery journalists. It was not his habit—nor that of most political leaders—to give 'exclusive' interviews to

newspapers, as is now common. The senior people could see him from time to time for a background chat. Yet his relations with the Fairfax press and the *Sydney Morning Herald* were hostile. This is set out in *Robert Menzies—A Life*:⁴

Always rocky, Menzies' rapport with the newspaper [*Sydney Morning Herald*] took a downward turn in 1958. The elegant J.D. Pringle, editor between 1952 and 1957, had espoused causes naturally antagonistic to Menzies' policies (recognition of Red China and revulsion at Britain's Suez performance were prime examples) and tension between Menzies and the management group of the paper—especially Warwick Fairfax, the owner and 'Rags' Henderson, the managing director—was long standing.

Gallery old hands explained that the antagonism between Menzies and Warwick Fairfax stemmed from an affair Menzies had with Fairfax's wife (I cannot recall anyone saying which wife—Betty, the first wife, or Hanne, the second—but government staffers and senior public servants accepted that Menzies had an affair with Fairfax's wife). I have never been given any details or evidence. David McNicoll introduced a new angle to the Menzies–Fairfax feud with the publication of his book *Luck's A Fortune*. McNicoll, a first-rate journalist from a middle-class Victorian family, mixed with and reported on Sydney society, largely because he was the right-hand man of Sir Frank Packer, proprietor of *The Daily Telegraph*. Packer's son, Kerry, and grandson, James, were the beneficiaries of Frank's brilliance in building the family fortune on *The Women's Weekly* and *The Daily Telegraph*. It was Frank Packer who secured the goldmine of a commercial TV licence and built Channel Nine into the dominant commercial network. After the war, McNicoll wrote a clever and informed daily column, on page one of the *Telegraph*. There was not much happening in the upper reaches of Sydney society that McNicoll did not know about. In *Luck's A Fortune*, he published, in full, a taped interview he had with Menzies, then aged eighty-three and with his retirement eight years behind him. In the interview, the following appears:

McN: I tell you who I saw the other night. I went and had a drink with Hannah (then Lady Lloyd Jones).

Sir R: Oh yes.

McN: She was looking very well, I thought.

Sir R: Was she?

McN: Yes, very well, I thought. She hadn't been well.

4 Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, pp. 377–8.

Sir R: No she had not.

McN: But she was in good heart. [McNicoll went on to discuss another matter.]

This exchange raises a point McNicoll might not have realised. When he mentioned he had a drink with ‘Hannah’, he did not say Lady Lloyd Jones. This explanation in a bracket was put there for McNicoll’s readers. Menzies might well have thought McNicoll was talking about Sir Warwick’s second wife, Hanne, whom he married in 1948, the year before Menzies defeated Chifley to return to the prime ministership. James Fairfax, oldest son of Sir Warwick, describes the arrival of Hanne on the Sydney scene in *My Regards to Broadway*. She was Danish and her family lived in Copenhagen. She married an Englishman, Donald Anderson, who worked for Shell in Malaya and was transferred to Bangkok and, when war broke out, Hanne and her baby son, Alan, were flown to Singapore and later, with other wives, evacuated by boat to Sydney. Anderson became a prisoner-of-war in a Japanese prison camp in Bangkok. In Sydney, Hanne became involved in the ballet set and, through this, met another ballet enthusiast, Warwick Fairfax.

There was a development on the Menzies ‘affair’ in the February 2007 edition of the *Sydney Institute Quarterly* (SIQ), published by the Sydney Institute—described by the ABC ‘as an influential privately funded think tank dedicated to the principals of policy debate’. The Executive Director of the Sydney Institute, Gerard Henderson, was a staffer for Kevin Newman, a minister in the Fraser Government from 1984 to 1986, and was later chief of staff to John Howard (then in opposition). Regular listeners to Henderson’s comments on ABC’s Radio National *Breakfast* know he was quick to defend Howard and his government from critics. One such critic is Mungo MacCallum, who was for some years in the gallery and now lives in semi-retirement at Byron Bay, although he still writes and commentates. SIQ took to MacCallum for stating in *The Monthly* that Sir Warwick Fairfax had ‘belatedly’ discovered Betty had conducted an affair with Menzies. MacCallum was described by SIQ as ‘the-gossip-of-Byron-shire’.

SIQ asked Sally Warhaft, editor of *The Monthly*, if she had checked on the Menzies/Fairfax affair before publishing MacCallum’s claim as a fact. She replied: ‘I spoke to Mungo about this. When I first read it I said I felt very uneasy about it. He said he’d talked to a lot of people and it was common knowledge and he’s published it before. I accepted Mungo’s insistence that his sources were strong.’

SIQ then quoted A. W. Martin in Volume 1 of *Robert Menzies—A Life*, with Menzies writing to Betty in 1939, when he was overseas, saying he would have a drink with her on his return. SIQ made a fair point that it would be an unusual way to conduct an affair if Menzies wrote to Betty saying he would have a drink

with her at the Warwick Fairfax household. Various authorities are quoted by *SIQ* debunking the suggestion of an affair although none—except Gavin Souter, author of the Fairfax histories *Company of Heralds* and *Heralds and Angels*—had worked in Parliament House when Menzies was in power.

SIQ asks: ‘Why would Warwick Fairfax wait until the 1961 federal election to oppose Menzies for a deed which had allegedly occurred some two decades previous?’ Why indeed. Looking at the McNicoll interview with Menzies, it seems to the author that the story could be about the wrong wife, Betty. If there indeed was an affair, it might have been with Hanne. MacCallum was correct in saying the Menzies affair was taken as fact by hundreds. One final point: *SIQ* says that journalist Gideon Haigh stated he had interviewed A. W. Martin, who said Ian Fitchett ‘had debunked the rumour in a personal conversation with him [Martin]’. This is second-hand evidence. The author can report firsthand evidence from Fitchett, who told me in the mid-1960s of Menzies’ affair ‘with Warwick’s wife’. In the author’s discussion with people in the Sydney society set, I discovered it was taken as fact that Menzies had an affair with Betty, Fairfax’s first wife. I have gone into what is now political folklore of the Menzies affair simply because it is an interesting aspect of the life of one of the giants of Australian politics.

The McNicoll interview revealed a lot about Menzies. He certainly did not realise it was to be published. Asked by McNicoll whether the Country Party should amalgamate with the Liberals, Menzies went further and said the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) should also be part of the amalgamated party. He went on to complain about the new Australian Party established by Gordon Barton:

Sir R: Of course this damned Australia Party.

McN: What a pack of bastards they are. You know—I think they’re beyond the pale because as Malcolm Fraser pointed out to me on the phone the other day, a lot of their policies are on parallel with the Communist Party.

Sir R: Of course they are. Well I remember this little squirt (Gordon) Barton coming with two or three fellows when I was Prime Minister and all they wanted was that IPEC to be given the third interstate airline. Well I had gone to great pains to create the two airline policy and so I had to say to them,—‘Well look I am sorry—nothing doing. The two-airline policy is right and I am not prepared to depart from it.’ And when he left that day I had settled it. If I had said ‘yes’, he would today be the President of the Liberal Party. Because I had said ‘no’—he hates the Liberal Party—determined to destroy it. And for a silly rabbit like Gorton to be trifling with this fellow—oh, it’s outrageous.’

This did not say too much for competition and the market economy. (Gordon Barton was a brilliant businessman who founded the Australia Party, a precursor of the Australian Democrats, and built up IPEC, a major courier company. This was eventually taken over by the trucking company TNT run by Peter Abeles.) Menzies' comments suggest the adherence now of the Liberal Party to competition and the market was not a view supported by the party's founder. The anti-Catholic prejudice of the two men is shown when the following arose from a discussion about Whitlam:

Sir R: Whitlam is pretty shrewd...in a parliamentary sense. I know when he is reading a speech, but I also know he knows how to read it. I hate him.

McN: What do you think of this move last night? (Whitlam's inducing Senator Vince Gair to abandon the DLP by accepting the offer of appointment as Ambassador to Ireland and The Holy See.)

Sir R: I knew Gair years ago—when he was Premier of Queensland. He was a pain in the neck every time we had a Premiers conference. Conceited little booby.

McN: Bog-Irish booby.

Sir R: Oh, bog-Irish booby. But this is the most blatant piece of bribery I've ever seen.

Yet it was to attract the Irish-Catholic vote that Menzies became the first prime minister to give 'state aid'—subsiding the interest paid by the Church for science blocks in private schools. And it was Gair and his DLP colleagues who kept Menzies in power after the Labor split. In a conversation I had with Whitlam, he pointed out that no Catholic was appointed to head a department or an instrumentality between 1952 and 1972 by Menzies, Holt, Gorton or McMahon. Gough Whitlam was unaware of Menzies' comments about him until I interviewed him soon after his ninety-first birthday. He was puzzled as to why Menzies (when eighty-three) would have told McNicoll that he 'hated' Whitlam. Menzies knew Whitlam's father, Fred, who was the Crown Solicitor (a connection strengthened by the fact Menzies' brother Frank was the Crown Solicitor for Victoria).

Fred was Deputy Crown Solicitor in the early 1920s and, when the Parliament moved from Melbourne to Canberra, Whitlam's father moved from Sydney to be Assistant Crown Solicitor. Whitlam said Menzies would have been aware of his father on several counts. Canberra was a small town then and, public servants overwhelmingly dominated professional and social activities in the national capital. The Whitlams even lived next door to a Menzies, Sir Robert's brother

Les, who was a public servant and returned soldier. Fred Whitlam became Commonwealth Crown Solicitor in the first Menzies Government. Whitlam said Menzies was aware of his father and of course, through him, he would have been aware of his son, Gough, before he entered Parliament. Whitlam thought what could have grated on Menzies was his lack of understanding of what was going on in the Labor Party. Former senior diplomat Richard Woolcott refers to this in a conversation with Menzies at the St Regis Hotel, New York, in 1965:

He [Menzies] said he did not believe Arthur Calwell would ever become Prime Minister, but Jim Cairns would. It was 'inevitable' that the Labor Party would come into government in the future. Deep down, Menzies remarked, Cairns was an honest man, despite some of the foolish things he had said, and he had brains too. Members of Parliament did not really trust Whitlam but they did trust Cairns. 'He probably prays every night that my name will be struck from the book of life. I must have more time for him than he has for me', Menzies said. Whitlam, according to Menzies, was 'a bit precious'.⁵

Menzies' view of Cairns as superior to Whitlam was not the majority view of the Caucus. Cairns challenged Whitlam for the Labor leadership in 1968 and Whitlam won, 38 votes to 32. It was closer than Whitlam expected. According to Graham Freudenberg, this was partly due to the defection of two NSW right-wingers: Fred Daly, who had his own leadership ambitions, and Frank Stewart, who found Whitlam overbearing. Cairns, whom Menzies said was honest, ended his political career ignominiously—Whitlam sacking him because, as Treasurer, Cairns misled the house. Menzies sent Whitlam a message of condolence when his father died. Whitlam also remembers that when Menzies' second son, Ian, died, Menzies' daughter, Heather, and her husband were at the Australian Embassy in Manila. Whitlam, as Prime Minister, was in Manila at the time and gave her a lift back to Australia on the VIP aircraft. Menzies wrote a letter thanking him.

Whitlam believes he might have aroused Menzies' ire when the Liberal leader cast aspersions on Reg Pollard (a minister in the Chifley Government). Whitlam defended the Labor stalwart, comparing his record with that of Menzies. Pollard had been commissioned in the field as second lieutenant in World War I. He was wounded in France and invalided home in 1918. Earle Page had attacked Menzies for not serving in World War I. The author believes Menzies, who had absolutely dominated the Parliament after the death of Chifley, was uneasy at the prospect of Whitlam challenging him as the outstanding parliamentary performer of his day.

⁵ Woolcott, Richard 2003, *The Hot Seat: Reflections on diplomacy from Stalin's death to the Bali bombings*, Harper Collins, Sydney.

Because of ill health, Menzies almost missed the 1952 Commonwealth Economic Conference held in London. The main problem dealt with at the conference was one that had dogged the sterling bloc (which included Australia) since the end of World War II: convertibility of sterling into US dollars. In June 1949, the High Court ruled that petrol rationing was unconstitutional under the defence powers. Chifley introduced petrol rationing to show Australia was a responsible member of the sterling bloc, and this policy was much appreciated by Britain. The Chifley Government persuaded all the States to either give their powers to the Commonwealth or legislate to restore petrol rationing. The reimposition of rationing began on 15 November—25 days before the December 1949 election. As Martin says: ‘The re-imposition of petrol rationing on the eve of the election gave the opposition, especially the Country Party, an unprecedented opportunity to lure electors with a promise of abolition.’ Fadden had driven the petrol-rationing issue harder than Menzies throughout the campaign. This was yet another example of the electorate being lied to and those responsible for the lie being the beneficiaries at election time.

To make matters worse, Fadden proposed that to tide Australia over in the few months until the Menzies–Fadden Government could end rationing, the Government could draw on defence reserves of petrol. A commentator, N. L. Cowper, was furious: ‘This was a discreditable suggestion which would have raised a storm of protest and accusations of treason if the roles had been reversed and it had been made by a Labor Leader.’ So in 1952 the Americans, although refusing to budge on their highly protective tariff barriers, were pressing for multilateral trade. It was a good idea, but it would not work without convertibility of currencies. Would Menzies have had a twinge of conscience about this topic? There was a large element of hypocrisy about his victory over the Chifley Government in 1949. True, a major factor in the defeat of Labor was Chifley’s stubborn insistence on proceeding with legislation to nationalise the private banks. Menzies rightly made this a major issue. Yet, as explained above, another issue was the refusal of the Chifley Government to abandon petrol rationing on the grounds that it would create such a demand for dollars as to weaken the sterling.

Menzies was a renowned Anglophile—‘British to the bootstraps’, as he once described himself—and the prime minister who fawned on the young Queen Elizabeth during the 1963 royal tour: ‘I did but see her passing by; but I will love her till I die’, said Menzies in the King’s Hall reception (reciting an ‘Old Bard’). The Queen was visibly embarrassed. Yet in 1949, in a grab for power, he was prepared, against the direct interests of Britain, to use petrol rationing to come to power. A. W. Martin summed it up nicely writing of the 1949 election

campaign: 'And in what some saw as a rather unworthy bribe, especially to country voters, he undertook to "make it our business to get petrol in adequate supplies"'.⁶

The Age, for one, thought 'there is a doubtful wisdom in raising hopes that if a Liberal-CP government took office, the need for petrol rationing would soon be over'. Though a lively debate on petrol rationing had been going on for some months, 'nothing has emerged to convince people trying to keep a detached view that rationing could be avoided or made unnecessary by a change of office-holders'. And later Martin explained that 'despite claims that petrol was available from sterling sources, the British government appealed to Australia to go with rationing'. In a footnote, Martin adds: 'On June 2 Fadden claimed in Parliament that the New Zealand Minister of Finance, Walter Nash, had told a deputation of motoring interests that "dollars were no longer the reason for the continuation of rations"'. Subsequently, Nash denied that he had meaningfully made such a statement and asserted that rationing was retained 'at the request of the UK government, which had affirmed, under existing conditions, the savings of petrol saves dollars'.

Menzies was anything but an autocratic prime minister who insisted on getting his own way. He believed in letting ministers run their portfolios as they saw fit and would interfere only if he believed there was a chance of a serious administrative or political error. An excellent chair of Cabinet, he had the facility to sum up a Cabinet debate on a matter before moving on to the next item on the agenda. Cabinet was anything but a rubber stamp and, like all Coalition cabinets, in his, there was no formal voting. Menzies, on political matters, would consult widely with his ministerial colleagues whose advice he valued. He would, of course, have sought advice on military and strategic matters—the wars in Korea and Vietnam, for instance. Like Menzies, none his closest colleagues had experienced military service. But there were many who had on both sides of the Parliament.

⁶ Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, p. 118.