

7. Booze, Sex and God

Booze, sex and power suffused the old parliamentary building and they could be sensed particularly in the non-members' bar. The entrance to the non-members' bar was on the ground floor at the rear of the building, on one side of the two large courtyards, each dominated by a huge poplar tree dating back to the 1920s, planted during construction of the building. The non-members' bar was the social centre for all who worked in the place, including the parliamentarians. They had their own bar, but often preferred the company available—particularly female—in the non-members' bar. When the Parliament was sitting, the non-members' bar was a busy meeting spot in the evening, right up to one hour after the house or the Senate rose—generally about 10.30 or 11 pm.

When the bar closed, drinkers drifted off to various offices and drinking spots around the building. Like most licensed establishments throughout Australia at the time, here, ladies did not enter the bar. Off the non-members' bar, a small room for ladies was served via a hatch from the bar. Here there were at least as many male drinkers as there were females. Some years later, the ladies' 'brown room', as it was called, was shut and ladies came into the bar. The extra space was used to expand the non-members' bar, which, although still crowded, was a little more comfortable. It was a place for gossip, tips and assignations, as well as for excessive drinking. The gallery, until the old building was vacated, was a very boozy establishment.

Excessive drinking made one of the annual gallery dinners, addressed by the Governor-General, Sir William Slim, a lively affair. The great British general of World War II and hero of the Burma campaign was the guest of the gallery at the Hotel Canberra. He succeeded at Yarralumla Sir William McKell, a former NSW Labor premier, appointed by Chifley. The dinner was in a private room and Slim sat at the head table with the gallery office-holders, including the treasurer, Les (Lapper) Love.

Despite his aversion to Tooheys beer (the brew served in the hotel), Les managed to sink a fair quantity of it in the pre-dinner drinks session and, by the time Slim spoke, Les was asleep. Slim's address was gripping, as he outlined the horrors of the Burma campaign, with the Allied forces up to their armpits in 'Japs', snakes and mosquito-infested swamps. Les suddenly awoke and declared to the dinner his trade mark 'LAPPY DAYS'. Whereupon a bristling Slim turned to him and, through gritted teeth, said in measured tones: 'You wouldn't have thought it happy days if you had been there [pause] *son*.' Quite properly, the diners refrained from roaring with laughter. Les was too far gone to be embarrassed. Slim soon got over the incident and we all had a wonderful night.

Before we left the private dining room for another room for the post-dinner drinks (the serious part of the evening), Les had passed out again. Someone had draped him over one of the hotel's antique couches when we left. After an hour or so, I thought it best to check on Les and returned to the dining room. He was still passed out on the couch, but must have revived at some stage and lit a cigarette. Passing out again, his lighted cigarette had fallen from his hand, burning a large hole in the couch. I carefully placed a serviette over the hole, moved Les onto another couch and, rather to my shame, left him.

The shine was somewhat taken off the luminous career of Sir William in 2007 when David Hill, a former general manager of the ABC, authored *The Forgotten Children*,¹ based on his experiences as a Fairbridge kid transported to Australia. He raised allegations against Slim in a newspaper interview about his book. Later, Robert Stephens, a former orphan committed to the Fairbridge Farm School at Molong, in an interview with *The Australian*, made specific allegations against Slim. In brief, he claimed that when Slim paid a visit to the school Stephens was required to sit on Slim's lap in the back seat of the official car. The British war hero, Stephens said, slid his hand up the inside of his shorts and fondled his bottom. The Fairbridge Foundation Council Chairman, John Kennedy, said the council would consider whether Fairbridge should accept responsibility for sexual abuse of the boys, but nothing more was heard of it. When Sir William's term as Governor-General ended in 1959, he returned to Britain, elevated to the peerage as a viscount and appointed Chairman of the London Fairbridge Society.

There were few teetotallers in the Old Parliament House. Menzies certainly enjoyed a drink and could carry his liquor well, but on one occasion in the house, he appeared affected by alcohol. Menzies had generated much heat in 1951 proposing legislation to ban the Communist Party of Australia, and initially the Labor Party blocked it in the Senate. The legislation gave the Government power to 'declare' a person, or an organisation, 'communist' and a person so declared was barred from any employment by the Commonwealth, or with a trade union. In the house in that year, Menzies had a heated run-in with the colourful Labor MP from Sydney Eddie Ward. Menzies was speaking of a measure to amend the double-dissolution provisions of the Constitution, particularly when the Senate could have equal numbers on either side, and Menzies asked rhetorically, 'What would happen then?' Then came the following exchange:

Ward: 'The right honourable gentleman could declare a couple of the Labor Senators.'

Menzies: 'I am obliged to the Honourable Member for the suggestion, I could think of at least one Labor Senator whom it would be easy to declare.'

1 Hill, David 2007, *The Forgotten Children*, Random House, Sydney.

Ward: 'The fuehrer has spoken.'

Menzies: 'I can think of one member of this House [obviously Ward] who might escape only by the skin of his teeth.'

Chifley (Leader of the Opposition): 'The Right Honourable Member [Menzies] is on dangerous ground.'

Menzies: 'I agree, on dangerous ground. I suggest to the Right Honourable gentlemen that he might restrain his interjectors; that of course, the problem does not arise because—'

Chifley (cutting in): 'I suggest that the Right Honourable gentleman should not make threats.'

Menzies: 'I never make a threat that I do not carry out.'

Ward: 'The Right Honourable gentleman is drunk with power.'

This exchange greatly upset Chifley, who later said that Menzies had shown what was in his mind before he had time to put a 'curb on his tongue'. A. W. Martin, Menzies' biographer, said that the journalist Ian Fitchett, who was in the press gallery that evening, believed Menzies was slightly affected in his behaviour by drink—an occurrence Fitchett had never seen before.

One of the more spectacular drunken performances of the 1960s was in the Senate chamber, when Labor Senator from Western Australia Harry Cant found himself seriously drunk and trapped by a division. The doors were locked and the division required Labor senators to cross to the other side of the chamber, sitting in the places of the government senators for the count, while the government senator moved to the opposition benches. Cant was overcome by an urgent need to vomit. Looking around desperately, he came to a decision. Opening the desk drawer of the government senator's desk where he was seated, he was violently and noisily sick into it.

When the division was over and the senators resumed their normal places, the government senator in whose place Harry had sat was understandably disgusted. The stench created by this extraordinary happening filled the chamber. He did not draw the President of the Senate's attention to the outrage or make a fuss. Urgent action was required. All this had taken place in the full view of the journalists in the Senate press gallery and those in the public gallery. News of the outrage was soon all over Parliament House and journalists rushed to get the story. Medical practitioner Dr Felix Dittmer, a Queensland Labor Senator, had the answer. He denied Cant was drunk and ordered that an ambulance

be urgently called to take Cant to the Royal Canberra Hospital, just across Commonwealth Avenue Bridge in Acton. Dittmer stated that Cant was suffering from an acute case of 'renal colic'.

The ambulance arrived and a Labor colleague suggested to Dittmer that it would be discreet for Harry, now prone on a stretcher, to be taken through the back exit of Parliament via the kitchen. Labor Deputy Senate Leader, Pat Kennelly, rejected this. So the little procession of the two ambulance officers carrying the stretcher with Cant prone, and Dittmer leading, made its way through the Senate opposition lobby, across King's Hall where visitors gaped, and down the front steps to the waiting ambulance. In hospital, Cant made a speedy recovery and was discharged the next day. From then on, if an MP entered either the house or the Senate looking a little confused, the interjection would go out: 'Renal colic.'

Gough Whitlam was involved in a lively incident on the floor of the house after one dinner break. Whitlam was sitting in the Opposition Leader's chair when Jim Forbes, a Cabinet minister, came into the house apparently the worse for wear. After some disparaging remarks from the opposition side, someone on the government side suggested Forbes was suffering from 'a bad back'. Whitlam responded, 'It's what he's put in his guts that's rooted him.' After this incident, if someone came into the chamber looking somewhat tired and emotional, there was a new interjection to add to 'renal colic': 'bad back.' The 'bad back' incident did not damage Forbes' reputation and, in later years, he was elected Federal President of the Liberal Party. A graduate of the Royal Military College at Duntroon, Forbes served with the 2nd Australian Mountain Battery in Bougainville, and was awarded the Military Cross in 1945.

Because so many MPs could be vulnerable, both sides of politics avoided attempting to make political capital from the boozing habits of MPs. If, however, alcohol is seen as affecting someone's public life, they are open to attack. Given the pressures of parliamentary life and the entertainment offered MPs (particularly since the move to the permanent Parliament House), the behaviour of parliamentarians is generally commendable. No doubt many do get drunk, but they do not make a spectacle of themselves within the Parliament.

On matters of sex, the Australian Parliament has always been broad minded, as has the Australian population, certainly post war. Sexual encounters and adulterous affairs have been well known and common in the Parliament; it is said that powerful men have strong sexual urges and many women like powerful men.

At the 1961 election, Calwell went within one seat of winning government and Menzies was saved only when Jim Killen scraped by in the Brisbane seat of

Moreton, courtesy of the donkey vote that directed communist preferences to him. Killen, a great practical joker, invented the story that Menzies had telegraphed him, declaring, 'Killen, you are magnificent'. No such telegram existed and Menzies issued no denials. Despite his magnificence, Killen had to wait until 1969 to enter the ministry, when Gorton made him Navy Minister. Killen was one of the most-liked characters in the Parliament and had many mates in the gallery, including my partner, Don Whittington, who took every opportunity to boost him in *Inside Canberra*. Killen was at his very core a parliamentarian. Immaculately dressed at all times, with a neat RAAF moustache (like his great friend Gough Whitlam, he served in the Air Force during the war) and invariably with a red-carnation boutonniere.

A ferocious anti-communist, Killen paraded himself as a hard-right politician. For example, he defended apartheid, but Killen gave me the impression this was all a bit of an act. It was the popular thing to do in the Menzies era so Jim did it. His greatest mates were both on the Labor side: Gough Whitlam and Fred Daly. In advance of the 1972 election, noted English commentator and TV star David Frost came to Australia and interviewed, separately, Whitlam and Prime Minister, William McMahon. Frost's standard entry to an interview was to put a quick, unexpected first question. He asked Whitlam what did he consider was McMahon's best attribute. Without hesitation, Whitlam replied, truthfully, 'his persistence'. Frost asked McMahon had he ever told a lie. McMahon replied, in that strange quavery voice: 'I have never, ever told a lie'—an answer arousing mirth around Parliament House.

Killen frequently passed notes, via an attendant, to Whitlam in the house. The note passing aroused great suspicion with McMahon, who had dumped Killen from the ministry when he replaced Gorton. When Parliament next met after Frost's interview with McMahon, Killen, in the chamber, sent a note over to Whitlam, reading: 'Evensong will be at 6 pm to celebrate the end of Diogenes' search.' (Diogenes was the ancient Greek whom legend says wandered around Greece in daylight carrying a lantern and searching for an honest man.)

In the 1970 half-senate election, Syd Negus, an independent, was elected to represent Western Australia. He was an example of the occasional quirks of the Senate voting system and there was no reason he should have been elected. He campaigned for election on the basis of opposition to death duties, yet while the States had death duties, the Commonwealth did not. Negus devoted his maiden speech in the Senate to this issue. Killen phoned Negus to tell him what a great speech he had made and suggested it was so worthwhile he should also deliver it in the House of Representatives. Asked how this could be done, Killen said if he contacted the Government Whip in the House and slipped him a fiver it could be done. Negus thought this a great idea and off he went.

The reaction of the Whip is unknown. Gil Duthie held the Tasmanian seat of Wilmot for Labor from 1946 to 1975. Smallish and likeable, Duthie was a natty dresser. Killen phoned him, adopting a fruity English voice and introduced himself as the editor of the English magazine *The Tailor and Cutter*. He explained he would be visiting Australia and was anxious to interview Duthie because of the Tasmanian's reputation for stylish clothes. Gil was most flattered, appointments were made, but somehow, despite many apologies for missed appointments from the editor of *The Tailor and Cutter*, the interview failed to take place.

Killen made it to Cabinet rank as Minister for Defence in the Fraser Government where he adopted a very stiff-upper-lip, Westminster style of administration of the portfolio—quite out of keeping with his real character. When senate estimates committees sought to interview senior people in the military and the Defence Department, Killen instructed them not to attend. He told the committee he was minister and he was responsible to Parliament, which was true. The members of the armed forces and the bureaucrats in the department, according to Killen, were responsible to him as minister, not to the Parliament. His position was untenable and looked like a cover-up. Ministers in the House of Representatives simply did not go before senate committees to be questioned and since he could not go before estimates committees he finally had to agree that members of the military and the department could.

In 1976 Killen ran into serious trouble and, although I was not in any way involved in the hurt he suffered, I was under deep suspicion. *Nation Review*, a leftish, highly entertaining publication based in Melbourne, described itself as 'nosy like a ferret'. The 22–28 October issue featured a front-page bold headline: 'The Romantic Ministers.' Inside, Mungo MacCallum's story began:

Before Tuesday there had been exactly three veiled references to what has been the most publicly discussed association in Canberra this year: that between the Defence Minister, Jim Killen, and the Social Security Minister, Margaret Guilfoyle. The first was a line which appeared in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, the day after Guilfoyle was elevated from the outer ministry to the Cabinet and quoted by Monty Molonglo the following week: it said that Guilfoyle would assume the 12th position in Cabinet, directly under Killen. The second reference came in the newsletter *Inside Canberra*, which stated that people were talking about 'the regular juxtaposition of bedrooms occupied by leading members of the government parties' at a Canberra hotel. The hotel at that stage was the Canberra Rex.

MacCallum, noting the third reference, in *The National Times*, claimed the Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, was concerned about the personal behaviour

of members of his party, and that a minister had been asking members of the press gallery about the likelihood of stories getting into print. Soon after, Killen cut me in the government lobby. I had been on friendly terms with him because of my association with one of his best friends, Don Whittington. Then the penny dropped; he thought I was responsible for the reference in *Inside Canberra*. Killen would assume it could not have been written by Don, yet it was. Whittington, like most of us in the gallery, was addicted to gossip and he liked to spice up *Inside Canberra* whenever he could. To my great sadness and that of his second wife, Helen, and his many friends, Don passed away the next year. I decided then to clear the air with Killen. It could not hurt Don now. I sought him out and told him if he blamed me as being the author of the hurtful *Inside Canberra* item, he was wrong; Don wrote it. He accepted this and our good relations resumed.

The alleged association between Killen and Guilfoyle strained relations between Killen and his good friend Gough Whitlam. As MacCallum reported, Bert James, Labor's muck-thrower, asked Fraser a question in the house as to whether the Prime Minister was concerned about the 'personal behaviour of certain ministers' that could impair national security. Fraser dismissed it in a sentence: 'I think the honorable gentleman has deserved his own condemnation.' As MacCallum said, visibly shaken, Killen sent a note across the chamber to Whitlam, saying it was the roughest thing he had ever heard in Parliament. Whitlam sent a note back saying it had nothing to do with him and it was Bert James's exercise, not Labor's. Killen accepted this and remained until his death in 2007 a close friend of Whitlam's.

James's question was not considered very remarkable in the gallery, or around Parliament House. Backbenchers could, within limits, ask what they liked. It would be inconceivable today, however, for any backbencher of the major parties to ask such a question without clearance from his party leader. I do not believe Don or anyone else should have raised the Killen–Guilfoyle affair. In Australian journalism, the general rule is that the sexual affairs of politicians and public figures are not raised, unless it can be claimed this impinges on the duty and responsibility of someone in public office. There was nothing in the affair between two ministers endangering the national interest. The other practical point is that both sides of the Parliament know among their numbers there are, or could be, MPs engaged in affairs. An open slanging match would help neither side nor the national interest.

The media and the Labor Party focused on Prime Minister Gorton's encounter with a young woman, Geraldine Willesee, because it could have involved the national interest. There was a covert suggestion of a sexual element when Gorton impulsively took her to a late-night meeting at the American Embassy. Sex was

not the point of the attack on him—coming as it did from both the Labor Party and his own side of politics, particularly from Edward St John QC, a brilliant Sydney barrister. Rather it was Gorton's lack of judgment.

The bombshell sex story of the Whitlam Government was the affair involving the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Jim Cairns, and Junie Morosi. It led to questions in the Parliament only when Cairns appointed Morosi chief of staff in his office. Again, it could have involved questions of the national interest.

Don Chipp was elected to the Victorian seat of Higginbotham in 1960, then moved to Hotham and retired from the house in 1977. Having founded the Australian Democrats in that year, he then entered the Senate in 1978 as leader of that party and retired in 1986. Chipp was not always the middle-of-the-road, fair-minded politician he liked to portray himself as. As Navy Minister, he took a very tough line against the Liberals in the party room, including St John, who pushed for, and got, a second royal commission into the *Voyager* disaster. St John's maiden speech was devoted to the case for a second royal commission. Chipp joined with Prime Minister, Harold Holt, in interjecting during the speech—a serious departure from accepted behaviour in a maiden speech.

Minister for Customs and Excise in the Gorton ministry after the 1969 election, Chipp presented himself as the small-'l' liberal who believed in loosening up strict rules relating to the behaviour and rights of citizens. He made a name for himself by removing the ban on the sale of various books, such as *Portnoy's Complaint*. Yet, to show that he was a man of family values who would not tolerate pornography, he ordered customs to crack down on imported porn. Further, to emphasise his relentless pursuit of porn, he had pornographic books and magazines seized by customs available in his office so that MPs could see for themselves what a grand job he was doing. Male MPs from both sides of politics visited his office regularly to view the porn, particularly the graphic pictorial material—of course just to be informed of the great job the minister was doing.

His private secretary at the time was a young customs officer, Trevor Wright, a friend of mine. The seized porn, sent across to Chipp's office from customs, was the responsibility of Trevor and, if an MP desired to view the disgusting material, it was produced from Trevor's desk drawer. He noted that many MPs, some of whom portrayed themselves as high-minded adherents of the Christian faith, appeared regularly seeking to view the latest porn. Chipp also arranged showings of pornographic films seized by customs in its tireless efforts to save the population from exposure to lewd and degrading material. These films were shown over the dinner adjournments at the theatre of the National Library—close to Parliament House. The showings were free—naturally attracting many with a close interest in the work of customs.

‘God bless America’ has long been invoked at the conclusion of important speeches in the United States. In recent decades, with the rise of the Christian right, there is much call on the Almighty to go further to assist in the defeat of enemies of the United States. US President George W. Bush, who gave up the bottle and found God, regularly asked for divine intervention to assist in the contest against Muslims in Iraq. In the Federal Parliament, each day’s sittings begin with a prayer by the Speaker and Senate President to the Lord ‘to direct and prosper our deliberations for the true welfare of the people of Australia’. The Lord’s Prayer is then read.

In October 2008, media reports suggested the Labor Speaker, Harry Jenkins, advocated scrapping this practice. Issuing a ‘clarification’ statement, Jenkins said his comments were in relation to an interview of procedure and he mentioned he received a wide range of opinions about the prayer, including the appropriateness of using the 1901 Church of England version of the prayer and whether it should be updated ‘to the relevance of the prayer in modern Australia’. Predictably, Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull immediately declared they opposed scrapping the prayer.

Yet many people would believe no prayer is needed, from whatever faith. When the Federal Parliament first met after Federation, no prayer was offered. This led to a storm of protest from various Christian evangelical organisations, the Parliament gave way to the pressure and the prayer became part of proceedings. Gregor McGregor, leader of the Labor Party in the first Senate, protested that the prayer was a breach of the Constitution. He had a good argument. Section 116 of the Constitution states: ‘The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion and no religious test has to be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.’

The Constitution does make concessions to the Almighty. The Preamble refers to the parties to the Constitution, having agreed to unite, ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’. The oath of office requires those coming to office to swear to be ‘faithful and bear true allegiance to Her/His Majesty...[insert name of current monarch], Her/His heirs and successors according to law. So help me God.’ The Constitution sets out an alternative affirmation—a concession to atheists and others—asking for those swearing an oath to be loyal to the monarch and so on, but deleting ‘So help me God’.

Devout Catholic Brian Harradine, the former independent senator, objected in the Senate to other senators reciting the prayer when it was being read by the President of the Senate. ‘We are not in church,’ he noted. Harradine protested that the Senate’s Standing Orders stated the President and nobody else would

say the prayer. When the President began reading the prayer, in a clear protest, Senator Peter Baume would don his *yarmulke* (a skullcap) and recite a Jewish prayer.

Apart from that, Australian politicians are not given much to calling on the Lord to assist. In postwar Australia, voters have been quite happy to install prime ministers who were not at all religious, or at least were not seen to be enthusiastic Christians to the point of regular attendance at church. Ben Chifley was a lapsed Catholic, Bob Hawke an agnostic and Whitlam an unashamed atheist. Unlike Kevin Rudd, Menzies, Holt, Gorton, McMahon, Fraser and Howard were not at church every Sunday.