

9. Out on the Hustings: Getting in the votes

A Senate election on 9 May 1953 was the first election campaign I covered for the *Daily Mirror* and it was a tepid affair. The election was required by the Constitution. Normally a federal election is for the House of Representatives and half the Senate. Menzies, by calling a double-dissolution election on 28 April 1951, had the two houses out of step because after a double-dissolution the term of the Senate is backdated to the previous 1 July. In turn, this means half the Senate had to be elected three years later, hence the May half-Senate election.

Serious reporting came with the election of the House of Representatives only—called for 29 May 1954. Unlike the half-Senate election of the previous year, this was the first election in which Evatt, as Opposition Leader, was in a contest to decide the fate of the Government. The formal policy speech of the leader was and is regarded as the highlight of the election campaign. It was the moment—generally only three or four weeks out from voting day—when the political leaders would state with varying degrees of precision what they intended to do for the nation and, more particularly, the hip pocket. It was also obligatory to devote some high-flown rhetoric to the philosophical base of the leader's party and to explain how immeasurably superior it was to the opponent's party. These days, the Canberra press gallery relentlessly pursues opposition leaders, expecting them to state their detailed policies long before the election. Further, it is now customary to have separate launches in the election campaign for various aspects of policy. The formal policy speech then summarises these and invariably drops in something new just to keep the voters interested.

Travelling with Evatt in the 1954 campaign was an intense and testing experience. The accompanying journalists would have no idea in advance of what Evatt would say at his next meeting and had to get to grips with the often-complex points of his speech as he went along. He would promise a pension increase or some other social service benefit with little or no explanation of how it would be paid for. Menzies would promise nothing but a continuation of good Menzies governance—a policy he abandoned after his close shave at the 1961 election. He would also endlessly demand of Evatt that he explain how he was going to pay for his promises.

Unimpressive though Evatt's election speeches were, they were well grounded in economic expertise, provided mainly by Dr Ron Hieser, an Australian National University (ANU) lecturer and later a great mate of Bob Hawke when he came to the ANU. Hieser was a member of an informal academic group at the ANU of Labor supporters and was influential with the Doc. Hieser lived in the ANU-

owned flats at Barton that provided accommodation for academic staff. Some distinguished academics resided there, including historian Russell Ward. The Sydney *Sun* rented one of the flats for staff, and, with my first wife, Lesley, I lived in the same block as Ron, directly behind the Hotel Wellington. Our first child, Susan, was born at that time.

Evatt was friendly and approachable on tour, although he could be cantankerous if he did not like a particular report about the campaign and would not hesitate to ring an editor to complain. A source of constant irritation for him were the press estimates of the size of the audience he was addressing, particularly the evening meeting—regarded as the most important event of the day and invariably held in a public hall. The size of the audience was seen as a measure of the popularity of the leader. In fact, it was no such thing, although it was a measure of the efficiency and advertising ability of the party branches in various electorates in getting a good roll up. On most days, Evatt and Menzies would hold two meetings a day: one at lunchtime so that workers could attend, and another at night.

Evatt had the accompanying journalists browbeaten over the issue of audience size. Estimating the size of an audience is not easy if the meeting is in a park or a football ground. It is easier in a hall with a known capacity. With the Doc ever on the warpath about crowd sizes, journalists would generally come to an agreement on the true size of an audience and then add to it by a quarter or so. More often than not, the Doc would still not be satisfied and would be whingeing to our editors about poor reporting of crowd size. Outside the cities, the local paper would report honestly on the crowd size but by then Evatt and his entourage would have left town.

Covering Evatt meetings was not easy. Generally, a press table would be provided and placed at the front of the hall. Outdoor meetings were difficult to report; having to stand and take notes did not improve my shorthand outlines or their legibility. The handy little voice recorders—now standard equipment for reporters—were unknown, as were the marvels of mobile phones, emails, faxes and photocopiers. Graham Freudenberg tells of how, travelling with Calwell in the 1961 campaign, he and a secretary would have to produce Arthur Calwell's press releases on manual typewriters with carbon copies. The press travelling with Evatt would generally be given sketchy notes of his speech at a meeting, always at the last minute and sometimes after Evatt had actually begun his speech. In any case, the notes generally had little relevance to what he would say to his audience. These meetings were open to all comers and there was no attempt to confine it to supporters, although they did get most of the seats at the front of the hall, mainly by turning up early. There would be lots of clapping, and almost invariably hostile interjections.

Menzies—a far more skilled public speaker on these occasions—thived on interjections and could get his crowd clapping and laughing with his barbed and witty replies to interjections. The Doc was the opposite and would often try to deliver a serious debating point to an interjector, generally going right over the heads of his audience. Interjectors would not be ejected unless they seriously disrupted a meeting. Local party members often did the manhandling involved in ousting interjectors, rather than involving the police.

Reporting a lunchtime meeting was also difficult for afternoon-newspaper reporters. Often the Doc or Menzies would depart for the airport to get a flight to the venue for the evening meeting. Menzies and Evatt travelled mainly by TAA or Ansett, and the press party had to make their own arrangements to get the right flight and book hotels. Credit cards were unknown and it was a struggle to get money in advance from the office to pay these expenses. If I ran out of money, I had to beg for more to be dispatched, urgently, by telegram to a nearby post office. Afternoon-paper reps would leave meetings the instant the speech ended, rush to a phone and dictate a story to the office, hoping the Doc's or Menzies' press secretary would hold the plane for them. When we were flying to Perth with Evatt in the 1954 campaign, strong headwinds meant we had to land at Kalgoorlie in the early evening for refuelling. Several of the journalists went for a quick reconnoitre of the famous brothels in Hay Street where the girls, clad in minimum attire, stood in front of their individual brothels, which looked exactly like stables. It must be added we did not avail ourselves of their services, nor did we tell the Doc of this pornographic exercise.

I recall standing out the front of Lennons, then Brisbane's top hotel, with the Evatt party, other journalists and Clyde Cameron, the aggressive Labor MP (Hindmarsh, SA); a gorgeous young woman in a tight-fitting dress walked towards us and entered the hotel. She was a knockout and looked like someone from show business. Cameron made some licentious comment about her to our little gathering. Evatt immediately rounded on Cameron, saying something like, 'How dare you speak about that young women like that.' I never forgot this aspect of Evatt's character. He was a feminist long before we heard about it from Germaine Greer.

The *Daily Mirror's* political correspondent and head of its Canberra bureau, Kevin Power, travelled with Menzies on this election campaign. Other newspaper representatives would swap over: the bureau head with Menzies for a week and his number-two travelling with Evatt, and vice versa the following week. Power would not, and covered Menzies exclusively. Les Love was Power's bureau offsider and would have been entitled to travel with Evatt, but Les insisted on travelling with the Country Party leader, Artie Fadden. This was not to advance himself as a journalist. Fadden made considerably fewer column inches than the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition. Artie was much more fun to

be with and was regarded by all as a great bloke. Wherever he travelled in the bush, Artie and his party were well received; the entertainment and hospitality were endless. With the Country Women's Association (CWA) a social force in every town, vast quantities of lamingtons, sandwiches and baked dinners were consumed, not to forget the oceans of beer provided. Travel was mainly by car, often on dusty, bumpy roads for five or six hours a day. Artie would speak in town halls in the evenings, but during the day he would spruik from the back of a truck with an audience of two if necessary.

The 1961 election, when Menzies was almost beaten, was the last in which television played only a minor role. That election campaign was fought in exactly the same manner as the political leaders at the beginning of Federation conducted their campaigns. They were fought at public meetings, but this changed with the development of TV as the pre-eminent form of media. For the 1972 campaign, Whitlam opted for opening in a big hall: Blacktown Civic Centre, way out in the western suburbs of Sydney. It was also designed as a spectacular TV event. McMahon on the other hand decided an opening in a big public hall was too risky and instead prerecorded his policy speech in a studio and made it available to all TV stations.

For McMahon, speech making was a challenge, partly because of his unusual quavering voice and partly because of a total lack of eloquence. Laurie Oakes and David Solomon devote a whole chapter of their book, *The Making of An Australian Prime Minister*, to the agony McMahon went through to get this speech right. Instead of attempting to tape a half-hour speech in one take, the producer broke it into short segments. This had the advantage of not having to do a complete new taping of the speech if McMahon made a mistake. Even then McMahon had to do some segments many times before getting it right. Even with an autocue at his desk, he found it difficult.

In 1974 Whitlam returned to Blacktown—the scene of his 1972 election launch. Opposition Leader, Bill Snedden, had blocked in the Senate a number of key legislative packages, particularly the Medicare legislation. Whitlam dealt with this, he claimed, by calling a double-dissolution election. The real reason was far more practical: Treasury had warned in 1974 that the economy was sliding and unemployment was certain to increase. Whitlam decided to get to the polls. Snedden had his campaign opening at an invitation-only function on Sydney's North Shore with the ladies of the blue-rinse set. Since Bob Hawke's 1983 election, campaigns have become super slick affairs, heavily managed by minders with the TV and radio media as extras in the drama. Press secretaries, also known as media advisers (and now called, somewhat contemptuously, spin doctors), played a central role in managing campaigns. In the United States, they are more accurately labelled 'publicists'.