

10. Press Secretaries: Before spin doctors

None of Menzies' press secretaries could be described as a spin doctor, and they saw their role as providers of information (except Hugh Dash, who had no information to provide), rather than propagandists. They answered housekeeping questions from the gallery: when was the Prime Minister going overseas, or when would the Government say something about whatever; they issued press releases and notified the gallery of press conferences and important statements to be made in Parliament. They stayed away from attempting to sell policy, leaving that to their political masters. Television hit the political scene in full force in 1988 when the move was made from Old Parliament House to the permanent Parliament House. Press secretaries came to be seen as more in the mould of the American publicist. They did not hesitate to come up to the gallery to sell a line, or, just as often, complain about a report reflecting badly on their bosses.

Many of the press secretaries played favourites and fed material to journalists regarded as politically friendly. A good press secretary working for a humble backbencher will attempt to persuade the local press in the home electorate that a popular decision by the MP's side of politics—be it government or opposition—can be spun for the benefit of their boss. The MP might not have had the slightest influence on how the good news arrived. It does not matter; a press release can claim the boss has been 'tirelessly working' for such an outcome for years. It is easier if their MP master is from a rural or regional electorate. The local member outside the cities is a 'somebody' and well known, meaning local media report on their activities. The majority of city voters, however, have no idea who represents them, unless the MP is prominent in politics—maybe a minister or a senior opposition figure. Mort Nash, who for some years was press secretary to Curley Swartz, a minister in the Menzies, Holt and Gorton Governments, would seize a press statement favourable to the Government by another minister, cross out the minister's name, replace it with Swartz's name and wire it off to newspapers in Swartz's Queensland electorate of Darling Downs.

Prime ministers' press secretaries are a different breed and their task is difficult. For good or bad, the Prime Minister will get a lot of newspaper space and exposure in the electronic media. The media expects prime ministers to deal with, or comment on, virtually any major news item on a daily basis. John Howard and Kevin Rudd, even outside election campaigns, frequently gave one or two press conferences a day, plus a number of electronic media interviews, and perhaps a picture opportunity in a shopping mall or hospital. In Menzies'

day it was a lot easier; all that mattered were the newspapers. At one of his occasional press conferences, if asked a question not directly related to his own portfolio, Menzies would simply advise the questioner to ask the relevant minister.

Menzies was acutely aware of the importance of a first-class press secretary. Before he returned to power in 1949, he was keen to have a press secretary of the calibre of Curtin's (and then Chifley's) legendary press secretary Don Rogers. Menzies wrote that 'Rogers has built up his chief in a really remarkable way; he knows exactly what the public want to read, and he has a really burning enthusiasm for Labor's cause...I simply can't think of one man who is anywhere near his class'.¹

Menzies' press secretaries were (sequentially) Stewart Cockburn, Hugh Dash, Ray Maley and Tony Eggleton. I describe their qualities below.

King-Hitter: Stewart Cockburn

When I arrived in Canberra, Stewart Cockburn, an Adelaide man, was Menzies' press secretary. He tried to join the Navy at the beginning of the war, but an X-ray revealed a TB scar on his lung and he was rejected. He spent most of the war on Adelaide's *The Advertiser*—part of The Herald and Weekly Times newspaper empire—and, from 1947 to 1950, he was in London as correspondent for the Melbourne *Herald*. Cockburn saw quite a bit of Menzies in those years on the Liberal Party leader's visits to London. Back in Adelaide, Reg Leonard, later to become managing editor of *The Courier-Mail* and knighted, was Cockburn's chief of staff. Leonard, so Cockburn believed, was a talent spotter for Menzies.

Yet he was surprised to be asked by Leonard whether he would like to be Menzies' press secretary, succeeding Charles Meeking. Cockburn agreed to be interviewed by Menzies in Canberra. On meeting the Prime Minister, Cockburn told him he had to understand that until 1949 he had not voted for any party but the Labor Party. Menzies was unmoved. He said he did not care who Cockburn voted for as long as he thought he could 'do the job and be loyal'. (This is almost exactly what Menzies said when appointing Tony Eggleton some years later.)

As Menzies' press secretary, Cockburn was efficient but certainly not in the spin-doctor class of later practitioners. In the gallery, he was respected and seen as a straight shooter. The spectacle of a drunken Glenn Milne, a prominent News Limited columnist, rushing onto the stage to attack award presenter Stephen Mayne in December 2006 during the Walkley Award ceremony reminded me of

¹ Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, p. 2.

a much earlier event, involving Cockburn. During the 1951 election campaign, Cockburn was standing just to one side on the stage of the Adelaide Town Hall. Menzies was about to make his entrance and Cockburn, a bit edgy, was to give a signal to the ABC sound technician in the hall preparing to broadcast the event.

The hall was well filled when Ian Fitchett came to Cockburn and demanded to know there and then details of the trip the press party was to take with Menzies to the Woomera rocket range the next day. Cockburn was saying things such as ‘in a minute, Fitch’ and ‘can’t you see I’m busy’. With this, Fitchett, who could be a spiteful bastard, said: ‘You’re a fucking Murdoch stooge [a reference to Sir Keith Murdoch, Rupert’s father and at the time running the Melbourne *Herald*]; ‘you’re holding it back for the *Herald*.’ Cockburn’s temper flared and he punched Fitchett in the face. Fitchett staggered back and then replied with a punch right on Cockburn’s chin, almost knocking him out, but Cockburn responded and landed a punch into Fitchett’s ample stomach.

A police inspector and Alan Reid (Sydney *Sun*) broke up the scuffle. Cockburn remembers an outraged Fitchett declaring: ‘He king-hit me.’ This he repeated many times the next day in Woomera and for some days after that. Cockburn said that although most journalists and people in the packed hall awaiting Menzies’ arrival witnessed the incident, surprisingly there was absolutely no report in the media. In his conversation with the author, Cockburn said Fitchett reported to his editor that he had been involved in a scuffle and that was the end of the affair. In stark contrast, the unfortunate Milne’s indiscretion was extensively reported in all the media. TV news (which lives off action pictures) gave it a prominent airing. He also retained his job.

Menzies, most unusually, decided to stage a ‘picture opportunity’ (although not for TV, which had yet to arrive), by returning to his hometown of Jeparit, Victoria. A test match was under way in Australia and Menzies, like Howard, portrayed himself as a ‘cricket tragic’ who was a devoted follower of the game but a hopeless player. With a small press party, Menzies arrived at Jeparit in a RAAF VIP DC3. The media gathered around him on landing and Menzies asked Cockburn, ‘What’s the score?’ Ever efficient, Cockburn began reciting the itinerary: ‘We go to the Town Hall where the Mayor—.’ Through gritted teeth, Menzies snapped: ‘Not that score, the cricket score.’ Cockburn could not help.

Cockburn accompanied Menzies to London for the coronation of the young Queen Elizabeth, visiting Cape Town on the way home, where Menzies was guest of Daniel Malan, who headed the first South African government to lay the foundations of apartheid. Menzies was anxious to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth and he decided to break the journey back to Australia for talks with Malan. The Commonwealth was under heavy pressure at the time from the non-Anglo members for sanctions to be imposed on South Africa, or for it to be

kicked out of the Commonwealth. Menzies had stated at press conferences the author attended that apartheid should be seen as a matter of domestic concern to the Malan Government and there should be no action against South Africa. On his return to Canberra, Cockburn was exhausted and, soon after, his annual X-ray revealed a scar on his lung. He was ordered to bed and stayed there for weeks.

'The Dasher': Hugh Dash

Menzies' next press secretary, Hugh ('the Dasher') Dash, was the antithesis of Cockburn. Nor was he anything like Don Rogers, whom Menzies so much admired. The Dasher knew nothing about spin and never tried it. He was a rugby league writer for *The Daily Telegraph* before coming to Canberra and was definitely not from the Sydney establishment, but was up with a lot of what was going on in Sydney society. He had been press secretary to Sir Wilfred Kent Hughes, then the Minister for the Interior, whose major task was running Canberra. Then with the departure of Cockburn, Dash turned up as Menzies' press secretary. The Dasher was a heavy drinker, downing a bottle of beer for breakfast, while for morning tea he would visit his good mate Jack Murphy, manager of the members' bar, for a bracing double gin. On the stroke of noon, when the bar opened, he would be first through the door of the non-members'. Like most heavy drinkers, he ate like a sparrow: four middies was lunch, and so the day would go on. He was never under the weather.

As far as the gallery was concerned, Dash—although much liked as a companion—was of no help and seemed without any knowledge of what the Government was doing. Perhaps he knew a lot, but in any case he suited Menzies. Dash would often say something that was quite odd—for example, that Menzies was not interested in what was in the papers. Yet Menzies was more than interested in what was in the papers, particularly the Fairfax press, as A. W. Martin makes clear. Dash once said to me, in the non-members' bar, 'That Disney crowd are a funny lot. They rang me to get a comment from the Old Man on some anniversary of Mickey Mouse; he's never heard of Mickey Mouse.'

A. W. Martin quotes Sir William Heseltine—the Prime Minister's private secretary from 1955 to 1959—on Menzies' liking for a wind-down drink at the end of the day. In the absence of his parliamentary colleagues, Hugh Dash and Heseltine were summoned for a whisky and chat before the Prime Minister went home. Dash, a particularly colourful character, had a notable sense of humour and a great fund of stories, many of them with a bluish tinge. Menzies, who himself never swore or told risqué jokes, was greatly attached to and entertained by Dash. An often-unrecognised element in Menzies was his liking for larrikins

and other down-to-earth Australianisms. Two ministers who were particular favourites, Athol Townley and Senator Shane Paltridge, fell somewhat into this category. (Townley, representing the Tasmanian seat of Denison, and Paltridge, from Western Australia, were also well liked in the gallery.)

Menzies—unlike Fraser and later Howard—did not have a residence in his home city of Melbourne to spend time away from Canberra when Parliament was in recess. From the time he was elected in 1949, the Lodge was the only residence for him and his wife, Pattie (later Dame). Menzies had no close group of friends in Canberra and on Sunday mornings at the Lodge, time dragged. By mid-morning, Pattie would be busy preparing the Sunday roast (presumably it was the cook's day off). Often the phone would ring and Dash would be at the other end, whereupon Menzies would say in a loud voice (no doubt for the benefit of Pattie) something like, 'What, not another cable from London? Should I come in?' Pause. 'Oh, all right then.' The driver would be called, and from then until close to lunch, Menzies, Dash and the driver proceeded to spend a convivial time in the Cabinet anteroom over Sunday drinks.

Bernard Freedman had an experience belying the view of many outsiders that Menzies was a stiff and aloof figure.² Freedman, bureau head of the now defunct Melbourne daily *The Argus*, a pro-Labor paper, had often authored reports critical of Menzies. He was leaving the gallery in the 1950s to join the Public Service and was in Dash's office to say goodbye. Menzies' head popped around the door and Dash told the Prime Minister Freedman was leaving. 'Well', said Menzies, 'you'd better come and have a drink'. So the Prime Minister and the journalist moved to the cabinet anteroom. 'For the whole afternoon, we sat and Menzies served me whiskies and spent his time addressing me as if he was at a public meeting,' Freedman recalls.

'Good Shot': Ray Maley

When I came to the gallery, Ray Maley, who succeeded Hugh Dash, had been bureau head of *The Argus*. Ray was a tall, handsome man, with the classic film-star dimple in the chin, well dressed with an easy, likeable manner. We were both members of the Royal Canberra Golf Club. Bill McLaren, Secretary of the Department of the Interior (responsible for the administration of Canberra), was also a golf club member and was a target for Maley's ambitions. For some unknown reason, this department, which essentially was concerned with domestic administration within Australia, was responsible for the Australian News and Information Bureau (ANIB).

² Oral history interview, Old Parliament House, 8 December 2004.

With the aim of attracting both migrants and investment from abroad, the ANIB was responsible for publicising the attractions of Australia abroad. Ray would drink with McLaren at the club and was always keen to play a round of golf with the senior bureaucrat in the Saturday club competition. Should McLaren hit a reasonable shot, Ray would enthuse: 'Oh, good shot, Bill.' Ray's cultivating did the trick and in 1955 he was posted to New York as the ANIB man. Maley told me it was as good as winning the lottery. Ray's posting ended in 1961 and soon after he was appointed Menzies' press secretary. Hugh Dash had been struggling with health problems for several years and Menzies was often without a press secretary and others on the Prime Minister's staff did their best to fill in. Menzies' regard for Dash was such that he was loath to replace him, but finally his health had so deteriorated that a replacement simply had to be found. Ray knew the gallery well and was an excellent choice.

He was only fifty-one when he died tragically, on 29 September 1964, during a ball in Parliament House in honour of visiting royal Princess Marina. There was dancing in King's Hall and at the beginning of the evening I was talking to Ray and his wife, Jean. Ray, in his dinner suit, looked a picture of glowing good health. He had been having heart troubles and was telling me how he had played golf the previous weekend and how delighted he was that his heart was stronger. They turned from me to pose for a photographer when suddenly Ray staggered backwards and fell, hitting the back of his head on the parquet flooring. Bystanders rushed to help and comfort Jean. Labor Senator Dr Felix Dittmer was called and pronounced Ray dead. He was probably dead before he hit the floor.

Tony Eggleton: The great survivor

Menzies was in no hurry to find a replacement following the death of Ray Maley, finally settling on Tony Eggleton, a professional press secretary, not a partisan propagandist. Not for him the spin and the bullying tactics of more recent practitioners. He was a first-class journalist. In 1950 Eggleton left England for 12 months' experience on the *Bendigo Advertiser*, not knowing he was to be captured by Australia. Next he worked in Melbourne and helped put the first ABC televised news to air in 1956, before applying for a new position: Director of Naval Public Relations.

The then Navy Minister, John Gorton, sought someone who had worked in all three media—radio, TV and print—and there were not too many journos about at that time with those qualifications. Eggleton, in his first year on the *Bendigo Advertiser*, interviewed Gorton, then a new senator from northern Victoria.

Gorton (even then noted for his I'll-do-it-my-way approach) interviewed Eggleton for the job, overruling the Secretary of the Navy Department, who believed Eggleton was too young.

With Eggleton's appointment, the Navy had a PR division of one person—not much compared with today's battalions of PR staff in the Defence Department and the three services. On the night of 10 February 1964, off the NSW coast near Jervis Bay, the aircraft carrier *HMAS Melbourne* collided with the destroyer *HMAS Voyager*, cutting it in two, with a loss of 82 sailors' lives. Eggleton, still with the Navy and not on Menzies staff at that time, discovered Menzies was furious, having not been told immediately of the disaster and learning about it the next day on the morning news.

The Chief of the Navy Staff, Hastings Harrington (known in the Navy as 'Buggery Grips' because of the hair he grew on both cheeks), instructed Eggleton not to inform the media of the disaster. Eggleton told the author:

I didn't think that was very sensible and as the night went on, I told the Chief of the Navy Staff that it was an impossible situation and we had to make a statement. Finally we did make a statement. Menzies was impressed by the fact that at least someone in [the] Navy was trying to do something that night in the public interest. As a result of all that, the top naval people sent me over to Parliament House to try to cope with the Prime Minister and help with his news conference.

In the 1964 Senate election campaign, Eggleton worked with Senator Shane Paltridge, the Defence Minister, learning later that this was at the instigation of Menzies. Eggleton returned to naval headquarters in Canberra after the election and was later recruited as Menzies' press secretary. Eggleton told the author of his first discussion with Menzies in his new job:

I met the PM and I still remember him saying to me 'Look, laddie (he never called me anything else other than 'laddie' for the whole time I was with him), I have a fair command of the English language, so you won't have to write my speeches, but I would like some help with the media. I don't care what your politics are, as long as you feel you can work with me and for me—for my government...Look, laddie, you will come up with all sorts of things you want to do and I will just say 'no', but if you come back the next day, I may say 'yes'. I normally say 'no', but you shouldn't feel that you can't come back.'

Eggleton accepted this advice and often came back for another go after Menzies had refused something. Eggleton became press secretary about the time the Prime Minister became Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. Menzies rang Eggleton one evening and said:

Look, I've just been rude to a pressman. I was walking to my car from the back entrance [of Parliament House] and Jack Allsop [AUP] tried to stop me and I was quite short with him. I have been thinking about it over dinner and I was much ruder to him than I should have been. What shall I do?

Eggleton advised him to invite Allsop in for a cup of coffee and a chat. He assured Menzies he did not need to get involved in questions he did not want to answer. Eggleton told me that Jack Allsop thought it was Christmas and that Menzies was so pleased he remarked, 'I might be rude more often and get opportunities like that.'

Menzies' long career came to an end on 20 January 1966 when he told the joint government party meeting of his decision to retire. In his place, the Liberals elected Harold Holt. Menzies went to Government House and told his old foe, the Governor-General, Richard Casey (by then Baron Casey), he intended to retire. The following day, Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister held a much-anticipated press conference at Parliament House, with radio and TV hook-ups reaching across the nation. It lasted 50 minutes and there were 40 questions. The room was packed and in addition to virtually every gallery journalist, other journalists and broadcasters came to Canberra for the event.

In his opening statement before taking questions, Menzies said: 'This is something that doesn't happen very frequently—for a man to go out of office under his own steam. I've gone out of office before today under somebody else's steam, but this time under my own.' He explained that at the due date of the next election, he would be seventy-two:

I couldn't see myself at seventy-two after, by that time 17 years of prime ministership and six years leading the opposition and a lot of history behind that, couldn't see myself saying to the people of Australia, 'I want you to give me another term.' I don't think it would be fair to them and I don't think it would be fair to me, for that matter.

Menzies said the job had taken its toll. 'One becomes tired, not quite 100 per cent efficient. And I have an old-fashioned belief that the Prime Minister of this country ought to be 100 per cent efficient at all times.'

He spoke of his great affection for his wife, Dame Pattie, and, by chance, in interviews earlier in the day, Harold Holt and Bill McMahon had spoken of their wives. This probably prompted a strange question: 'How do you feel about retiring at the very moment when the first woman Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi] in the world is appointed? Is this a trend?' Menzies answered:

Well, I'll convey to Mrs Gandhi your ideas on this matter. I know her. She's an extraordinarily able woman and I wish her well. But she's not my wife. I have one of my own. Harold has one of his and Bill McMahon, God be praised, has one of his [laughter]. We are not answerable for our wives. They, poor dears, are answerable for us. [Ceylon in 1960 boasted the world's first woman prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, widow of Ceylon's assassinated Prime Minister, Solomon Bandaranaike.]

The first question, to everyone's surprise, came from a brash junior *Daily Mirror* reporter, Alex Mitchell, who beat the old hands for Menzies' attention: 'Sir Robert, you've talked about all the achievements of your time in government, but what about the failures?' Menzies gave the questioner a withering stare and replied: 'There weren't any.'

John Bennetts of *The Age* followed up: 'What about the Communist Dissolution Bill—wasn't that a failure?' (He was referring to Menzies' defeat in the 1951 referendum to ban the Communist Party.) Menzies deadpanned again: 'The Bill wasn't but the vote was.' In cricketing terms, the Prime Minister was playing with a dead bat.

The feature of the conference was the out-of-character performance by Jon Gaul, the political correspondent for *The Canberra Times*. A reserved young man, Gaul had been hyped up by his editor to put some searching questions to Menzies. Given his instructions, Gaul decided to mull over his tactics in advance in the non-members' bar—a lengthy process. By the time he made it to the conference room, Gaul was rearing to go. He shot question after question at Menzies, who patiently answered each of them. Gaul asked whether the buoyant Australian economy was due to Menzies' management, or to the Prime Minister's good fortune. He asked whether it was true that Menzies 'rode the wave' of the Australian economy. Menzies replied, 'I can assure you I'm no surfie.'

Finally, other journalists forced Gaul to give way. Les Love got the call and was so excited he lost his carefully written question in his notebook, managing some half-coherent effort. Broadcaster Ormsby Wilkins asked a pedestrian question about cricket. Gaul remained the feature of the press conference. At the end of the conference, Alan Reid, as arguably the most senior member of the gallery, made a brief speech wishing Menzies and Dame Pattie a long and prosperous retirement and concluded 'and may your memoirs, when you produce them, Sir, be as controversial, and I hope successful, as your own long and successful career'.

Menzies thanked Reid and noted the press conference had gone on for 50 minutes, adding 'some of you might say with some justification, "Well, he ought to give us 50 minutes; he's given us mighty few press conferences." Anyhow, thank you and good luck to you.'

Gaul's overenthusiastic performance did him no harm and he went on to a successful career as a public relations consultant. As a young man, he was a member of the Labor Party, but as a consultant, he was a key adviser to a succession of Liberal leaders on election campaign tactics.

On 9 March, when the House of Representatives next met after Menzies' departure, Harold Holt moved a resolution placing on record the value the house placed on his long, able and devoted service to Australia. Holt in his speech dealt with the myth of Menzies being such an authoritarian figure that his Cabinet colleagues had little opportunity in Cabinet to consider matters that came before it. Holt said:

As my colleagues who have sat in the Cabinet of the nation know, far from discouraging the presentation of independent view points around the table, he not only encouraged it but expected it. A great value we found ourselves deriving from his presence as Prime Minister was that as argument and debate unfolded around the Cabinet table he was able, with that calm, judicial quality of mind which is peculiarly one of his outstanding attributes, to pull the threads of an argument together... We did not always agree with his judgment, yet he would accept cheerfully and readily the decision of his Cabinet when a majority opinion was obvious.

Eggleton served four prime ministers: Menzies (for about six months), Holt, Gorton and, briefly, Fraser. He rose to the position of National Director of the Liberal Party. From the point of view of a gallery journalist, I found Eggleton one of the best. You did not have to be his mate, take him to lunch, flatter him or listen to political propaganda. For busy journalists, most importantly, he was rarely away from his desk, one floor below the gallery in his tiny office; not for him the non-members' bar. I could go directly to him in his office to put a query. If it was a Cabinet matter, Eggleton would reach into a drawer and produce a large volume, which he would briefly study.

He then would give me a run down on where a particular issue—the object of my inquiry—stood: the interdepartmental committee has reported on this to the appropriate minister; the minister will draw up a submission to Cabinet; this will be considered next week; the cost of the project is about \$x million; and room will have to be found for it in what is expected to be a tight budget.

In short, you had something with a factual basis for your story. Eggleton's availability was important for journalists who were, and still are, up against deadlines.

Eggleton and Menzies became close. He told me that as Christmas Day 1965 approached, Menzies said to Eggleton, 'Laddie, I like having Christmas with the family. You know, half a day with all the family, the kids and Christmas lunch. I'm quite happy then to go off to Kirribilli House, watch the ferries going by and listen to the cricket and the tennis on the radio. Will you come with me?' Although surprised, Eggleton agreed. He spent several days at Kirribilli House with just Menzies and the housekeeper—no-one else from Menzies' staff and not a single security officer.

Over their first meal, Menzies told his press secretary of his pending retirement announcement. He discussed his Cabinet colleagues and his successor, telling Eggleton, 'Look, I have a lot of confidence in Harold [Holt] and he will be a great successor and I'm sure he will take over from me.' Menzies added he would recommend to Holt that he appoint Eggleton at least for a trial. Menzies soon after held his retirement press conference and intended his resignation would formally take effect on Australia Day, 26 January 1966. Before Menzies' resignation, a senior minister, Shane Paltridge, died suddenly. Eggleton, Menzies and the ministry flew to Perth for the funeral, spent Australia Day in Perth, and Eggleton flew back to Canberra with Harold Holt as Prime Minister.

Eggleton told the author:

That night I slept at the famous old Esplanade Hotel in Perth with Menzies in a room on one side of me and Holt in a room on the other side. Next morning there was a knocking on my wall from the Holt side. I went and knocked on his door and he let me in, saying, 'Have you got an Australia Day message for me?' I said, 'Yes, I have (I had thought it all through) and he said, 'Good, well give it to me. I'm going to the toilet, so I'll read it while I'm in the toilet.' I thought, 'What's going to happen to my draft in there?'

Something was about to happen to Holt, which led to some of the greatest dramas in the Old Parliament House.