

Foreword

If the Canberra Press Gallery is an institution, Rob Chalmers was an institution of that institution. His career spanned 60 years and 12 prime ministers, 24 federal elections and five changes of government. There is not a member of Parliament today who can remember a Press Gallery before Rob Chalmers joined it in early 1951, moving up from Sydney as a young journalist. As a result, his insight was as unique as his experience. At a time when politicians and political correspondents alike have become simply talking heads on televisions for most Australians, scrutinised and judged on the same terms as minor (and not very interesting) celebrities, Rob has written the story of the men and women of the Australian Parliament and the Australian Press Gallery from the perspective of one who knew them: knew their foibles and their frailty, knew their strengths and weaknesses and their sometimes unexpected kindnesses. At a time of great cynicism about the political process, not just in Australia but around the world, this book provides an acute and timely reminder that politicians, and the journalists who report them, are not the semi-fictionalised figures flattened to ten second sound bites or thirty second direct-to-camera feeds that our modern media so often makes them appear to be, but instead are men and women frequently doing their best, and sometimes doing their worst, in complex circumstances and faced with huge dilemmas. Arriving in the Gallery just a few years after the Second World War, Rob had a front row seat and a backstage pass for both dramatic political crises and subtle policy changes for more than half-a-century, and in this book he has collected the most memorable. His observations are pointed – there are no free passes in this book, as there were none in *Inside Canberra*, the political junkie’s must-read newsletter he published for well over 30 years – and his sharp eye and sharper pen capture and sketch politicians from Billy Hughes to Bob Hawke and beyond. For many of us in Parliament House, losing Rob from the Gallery corridors was very much the end of an era. We are all lucky that he recorded so many of his experiences – a lasting record of a time past and of an extraordinary career.

John Faulkner, September 2011