

Preface

Ben Chifley occupied the Opposition Leader's chair and, opposite him, across the table of the House of Representatives, sat the recently elected Prime Minister, Robert Gordon Menzies, when I first reported Question Time. Here were the two giants of Australian politics: 'Chif', revered by my father, and 'Ming', whom he loathed. Menzies was often referred to as 'Ming' after a comic-book character, Ming the Merciless, an evil Chinaman dressed in robes and with long fingernails. (Another explanation was that 'Mingees' was the Scottish pronunciation of Menzies.) I was overawed and apprehensive on this day, 7 March 1951. Behind Chifley sat household names: Bert Evatt, Eddie Ward, Arthur Calwell, Reg Pollard, and Cyril Chambers. Behind Menzies on the front bench were Harold Holt, Artie Fadden, Jack McEwen, Earle Page, Richard Casey and Larry Anthony (father of Doug). On the back bench of the Government side sat the wizened figure of Billy Hughes, who was then aged eighty-nine. The public galleries, occupying two sides of the square chamber, were packed, as was the press gallery, occupying the other two sides—one above the Speaker's chair (where I sat), and the other on the opposition side. Some of the best-known political journalists sat in the press gallery: Alan Reid (*Sydney Sun*), Harold Cox (*Melbourne Herald*), and Ian Fitchett (*The Age*). The Speaker, Archie Cameron, read prayers and everyone stood.

Prayers over, we all sat down and Menzies announced 'with deep personal regret' he had received a letter of resignation from the Cabinet of Dame Enid Lyons, the widow of Joseph Lyons, Prime Minister for most of the 1930s. An extraordinary woman, mother of 12, she was only seventeen when she married the thirty-five-year-old Lyons, who was then the Tasmanian Labor Government's Treasurer. Dame Enid was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives and, as Vice-President of the Executive Council, the first woman to gain cabinet rank. After Menzies' announcement, the Speaker, craggy-faced Archie Cameron, revealed he had received a letter from M. Spaak, President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, inviting representatives of the house to 'certain proceedings' in Strasbourg. Cameron also announced he had received a letter from the President of the Knesset, 'the Parliament of Israel', as he put it, together with a resolution of the Knesset 'concerning the proposed re-armament of Germany'. The letter, said Cameron, was in Hebrew and French and he tabled it. Then Question Time began. In contrast with current practice, on this day, the Leader of the Opposition, Chifley, did not ask a question. Evatt led off, asking Menzies if he would intervene in retrenchments in the Legal Service Bureau, which provided advice to ex-servicemen. Menzies' reply was brief and courteous: 'I cannot undertake to intervene in one sense of the word, but I shall be very glad to discuss the matter with the Attorney-General, with a view

to ascertaining what the position is and what he has in his mind.’ No attempt at point scoring, or a smart reply: just a simple, straight answer to a straight question. For an hour, the Opposition asked about hides, sulfur, immigrant labour, defence, dollar loans, Commonwealth diplomatic services and currency.

All of this marked a milestone in my years as a journalist. Still only a cadet, I found myself at the very centre of political life in Australia and it had not taken all that long. I had no idea whether I would last in political journalism. I did know, however, that it was enjoying and satisfying. As it turned out, I remained in the press gallery at the Old Parliament House until May 1988—37 years—when the move was made to the new and permanent Parliament House on Capital Hill, directly behind the Old Parliament House. I remain a member of the press gallery and, at the time of writing, the journalist with by far the longest continuous membership, with more than 58 years on the clock and still ticking.

This book is in part a political history, and in part a biography. One objective is to give the reader some flavour of politics before television, radio and later the Internet came to dominate the dissemination of political news and comments. Giving the outsider an inside look at how the gallery operated and its place in the body politic is another objective. Such are the number of years covered by the book that many of the major dramas played out in the old Parliament are not even mentioned. Yet a majority of the main actors are assessed. Mainly, the book consists of events and people who have stuck in my memory.

Rob Chalmers