

# Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte, Askin and the Post-War Ascendancy

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Norman Abjorensen

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## **Abstract**

The formation of the Liberal Party of Australia in the mid-1940s heralded a new effort to stem the tide of government regulation that had grown with Labor Party rule in the latter years of World War II and immediately after. It was not until 1949 that the party gained office at Federal level, beginning what was to be a record unbroken term of 23 years, but its efforts faltered at State level in Victoria, where the party was divided, and in New South Wales, where Labor was seemingly entrenched. The fortunes were reversed with the rise to leadership of men who bore a different stamp to their predecessors, and were in many ways atypical Liberals: Henry Bolte in Victoria and Robin Askin in New South Wales. Bolte, a farmer, and Askin, a bank officer, had served as non-commissioned officers in World War II and rose to lead parties whose members who had served in the war were predominantly of the officer class. In each case, their man management skills put an end to division and destabilisation in their parties, and they went on to serve record terms as Liberal leaders in their respective States, Bolte 1955-72 and Askin 1965-75. Neither was ever challenged in their leadership and each chose the time and nature of his departure from politics, a rarity among Australian political leaders. Their careers are traced here in the context of the Liberal revival and the heightened expectations of the post-war years when the Liberal Party reached an ascendancy, governing for a brief time in 1969-70 in all Australian States as well as the Commonwealth. Their leadership is also examined in the broader context of leadership in the Liberal Party, and also in the ways in which the new party sought to engage with and appeal to a wider range of voters than had traditionally been attracted to the non-Labor parties.



## Introduction: Getting Dinkum

### **dinkum**

*adjective* **1.** Also, **dinki-di, dinky.** true; honest; genuine. *dinkum Aussie; the dinkum article.* **2.** seriously interested in a proposed deal, scheme, etc.: *Are you dinkum about it?* – *adverb* **3.** truly. – *noun* **4.** an excellent or remarkable example of its kind; *You little dinkum.* – *phrase* **5.** **dinkum oil,** correct information. **6.** **fair dinkum,** an assertion of truth or genuineness. (*Macquarie Dictionary*).

**POLITICAL** history in Australia as well as political journalism has come almost invariably to mean a focus on the Commonwealth as the locus of power and the exclusive subject of political interest. This ‘one dimensional’ approach to both scholarship and journalism has been correctly characterised as ‘doomed to incompleteness and distortion’ by its neglect of the two-dimensional system that exists in Australian political life.<sup>1</sup> A visiting American scholar in the early 1960s observing the issue of interstate relations in Australia expressed surprise that the subject had been largely neglected, attributable in part, he wrote, ‘because the whole field of State government has been neglected in Australia’, and that for years ‘Australian scholars evinced no interest in the subject at all’.<sup>2</sup> Federalism is not just a historical fact in Australia, but a ‘fundamental characteristic’ of the system of government.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of this lack of attention paid to the States, especially in regard to the differences between them, is to miss a key dynamic in the Federal system which effectively shapes the outline and operation of Australian politics.<sup>4</sup> As long ago as 1960, S. R. Davis, in the introduction to his ground-breaking *The Government of the Australian States*, was moved to lament the predilection of scholars for ‘the life of the national government, presumably for the excitement of probing at the heart of things,

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Galligan, ‘Introduction’ in Galligan (ed.), *Australian State Politics*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1986, p. x.

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Leach, *Interstate Relations in Australia*, University of Kentucky Press, Kentucky, 1965, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Holmes and Campbell Sharman, *The Australian Federal System*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1977, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Holmes, *The Government of Victoria*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976, p. 1.

or the simplicity of dealing with one system of government'.<sup>5</sup> It was a decade later before the theme was again addressed by John Rorke<sup>6</sup> who echoed the sentiments of Davis when he wrote that 'there can be no real grasp of national politics until the political operations at State level are known'. Just how important the States are can be seen in the large proportion of the work of the Commonwealth and its departments devoted to dealings with the States, estimated by one writer to involve 'perhaps as many as half of all Commonwealth government programs'. Indeed, no tier of government operates in isolation and many decisions take at Commonwealth level 'generate political and administrative issues at the State level'.<sup>7</sup>

### (i) The Nature of State Politics

The nature of State politics differs in many ways from national politics despite its close affinity and the contest between the same parties. State governments are quite rightly described as 'clearly the descendants of the colonial governments of the latter half of the nineteenth century'. Despite the advent of Federation in 1901, which transferred some of their functions to the Commonwealth, they still retained a wide range of activities, and these activities remained very visible; in 'each country town the court-house, the post office, the police station and the school were direct evidence of the impact of the State government; of these only the post office was taken over by the Federal government'.<sup>8</sup> In day to day activities, it is still the State government with which the citizen will most likely come into contact.

[T]he States are first and foremost developmental authorities: they own railways, irrigation schemes and electricity undertakings, and build roads dams and bridges, all of which they are always striving to improve, so as to bring more land under cultivation, provide better transport, and increase their industrial power. As well, they are conservation authorities: they supervise the use and disposal of Crown lands,

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<sup>5</sup> S. R. Davis, Preface to Davis (ed.) *The Government of the Australian States*, Longmans, London, 1960, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> John Rorke (ed.) *Politics at State Level – Australia*, Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Sharman, Campbell. *The Premiers' Conference: An Essay in Federal State Interaction*, Occasional Paper No. 13, Department of Political Science, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> J. D. B. Miller, *Australian Government and Politics: An Introductory Survey*, Duckworth, London (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), 1964, p. 117.

they plant and tend State forests, they regulate mining and the use of water. They are intimately connected with the economic life of their State.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship, therefore, between the people and the respective tiers of the Federal system is qualitatively different, and this tends also to shape perceptions. The long tradition behind the colony-states has its own historical and cultural momentum which is often expressed in ‘the hold the States have on popular feelings, of the constitutional safeguards that surround the States, and of the vested interests of State political leaders and administrative personnel in the preservation and full use of the States’.<sup>10</sup> It has to be remembered that it is the States which provide social services rendered in *kind*, as distinct from those of the Commonwealth which are nearly all provided in the form of *money*. The States, for example, provide the bulk of school education along with the hospitals and other health care facilities; they provide the police forces and courts of law.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the State government is *the* government at a grass roots, local level. Miller makes the useful distinction between governments of *provision* (States) and the government of *decision and finance* (Commonwealth). The function of the former is to act as the agents of development and welfare by providing physical, tangible assets such as schools, roads, bridges, irrigation areas, hospitals, railway lines and houses. The latter’s role is more abstract and not nearly so much in the field of physical provision. Thus, a State Minister and, more importantly, a State Premier, is ‘the distributor of tangible largesse’ on whose recommendation will depend a district’s chances of acquiring social capital.<sup>12</sup>

Davies has outlined a ‘different character of the party struggle in the two levels of government’. In the Federal sphere the parties fight over subsidiary principles as they are in agreement over essentials, but in State politics ‘they fight without any principle at all’. What differences remain at State level are confined to matters of administration or ‘team contests’ as to which team has the better administrators; as

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 118-9. This description is obviously not as accurate now as when it was written given the advent of privatisation, but it is apposite for the period under discussion in this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 121-2.

such these contests do not throw up ‘those issues that can and do split and sunder parties voyaging in deeper waters’.<sup>13</sup>

Miller has observed that despite the growth and prestige of the Commonwealth in relation to the States, ‘politics have remained obstinately regional’. This has been especially noticeable in regard to political leadership. Prominent political figures in the States have only rarely transferred their activities to the Federal parliament since the mass migration at the time of Federation, and while significant figures such as Lyons, Menzies and Theodore came from State parliaments, the Federal parliament has tended to recruit leaders from its own ranks. Leadership has proved a difficult task in the Federal sphere but rather easier in the States where

it is possible for a leader to become so identified with the interests of his State as to carry influence well outside the bounds of his own party; or, alternatively, to gain such control over his State party machine as to be unchallenged in leadership...A leader in a State parliament is closer to people and party organisations than a leader in the Federal Parliament. He has tasks to perform which are more closely concerned with the immediate interests of his people.<sup>14</sup>

It is often overlooked in the preoccupation with national politics just how powerful a figure a State Premier can be. One important and significant source of power was the former practice of concentrating both political and financial power in the hands of the Premier who was also treasurer. Such an arrangement gave rise to what Davies terms ‘Premier bossism’,<sup>15</sup> and helps explain why State leaders like Henry Bolte<sup>16</sup> and Robin Askin<sup>17</sup> were so pre-eminent. Sharman has noted that ‘the fusion of the roles of premier and treasurer in a single minister’,<sup>18</sup> was one of the dominant factors affecting the style of State administration. This is no longer the case,<sup>19</sup> but was so for

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<sup>13</sup> A. F. Davies, *Australian Democracy: An Introduction to the Political System*, Longmans, Green & Co, Croydon, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 1964, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Sir Henry Edward Bolte (1908-1990), Premier of Victoria 1955-72.

<sup>17</sup> Robin (later Sir Robert) William Askin (1907-1981), Premier of New South Wales 1965-75.

<sup>18</sup> Sharman, *op. cit.*, p. 22. He writes: ‘Queensland aside, the political dominance of the Premier within the parliamentary party is enhanced by his exclusive access to treasury expertise and to any plans and estimates that the Treasury may make. The extent to which other ministers and departments are involved in setting broad State priorities is largely a matter of the political strength of the Premier within his Cabinet and within his parliamentary party’.

<sup>19</sup> In New South Wales, the first Wran Government in 1976 departed from tradition with the appointment of a separate treasurer, as did the Victorian Labor Government under John Cain jnr. when it came to office in 1982.

the period studied here. The nature of Australian political parties also enhances the position of a State party leader as a political force given that the ‘centres of gravity of these parties have been firmly based in their State branches...and makes the national wing of the party dependent on their goodwill for many areas of national party activity’.<sup>20</sup>

## (ii) The Post-War World

The war had left its stamp indelibly on the Australian nation; no part of it was left untouched by the experience of mobilisation and the fear of invasion. The characteristics of service life permeated civilian life after the war, and the advent of the Cold War and the considerable tensions generated by the fears surrounding communism at home and ongoing uncertainty in the international situation ensured that ideas about defence and national security remained prominent in the public mind. Australia’s official war history attempts to capture the deep emotions that the war experience triggered.

Anyone who stood in wartime in an Australian city, immersed in the crowd, and watched the troops go by knew the strong and binding comradeship that a shared grief and pride can bring to men and women. It was not at the moment when the crowd cheered, but at the moment when emotion quietened them and the tears came unbidden while the men who had fought, strong, sun-tanned, tight-jawed and fit, swung past with that loose and confident stride that only Australian soldiers have; and, as rank succeeded rank, thoughts turned to those who had not come back and hearts were deeply moved by the patriotism which brings the dedication of men and women to causes that lift them out of themselves.<sup>21</sup>

It was that ‘loose and confident stride’ that would define the ethos of post-war Australia. It became, even at a subliminal level, a potent symbol of what Hasluck identified as the ‘stronger national consciousness’<sup>22</sup> that emerged after the war. It would find in its own way an expression in political culture that defined both a character type and a set of attitudes.

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell Sharman, ‘Discipline and Disharmony: Party and the Operation of the Australian Federal System’, in Campbell Sharman (ed.), *Parties and Federalism in Australia and Canada*, Federalism Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1994, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 625.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 627.

The war experience, too, had hastened the process of social leavening in Australia as service personnel found themselves among people previously thought to have been somehow ‘different’, whether through religion, class or occupation. Experience of military life dating from World War I impacted on the mindset of those who served and it worked to help break down or at least reduce hitherto rigid social barriers and class insularity. It also had the effect of encouraging teamwork that was now carried over into civilian life and politics. An example of this was in New South Wales where tensions between the Liberals and the Country Party severely undermined the appeal of a coalition government at successive elections in the 1950s, but with the accession to the leadership of World War II veterans such as Askin and Cutler, and the majority of their followers, the teamwork ethos derived from shared military experience prevailed over territorial considerations.

A similar phenomenon was also observed in the civilian workforce with the mobilisation of manpower, setting in train ‘a mixing-up process for which there had been no earlier parallel except perhaps in the gold rushes’.<sup>23</sup> The effect of this was to reshape to a large extent the social landscape that would see in the post-war years a degree of political realignment inconceivable before the war.

The emerging *zeitgeist* of the post-war era was decisively shaped by these factors.

### (iii) The Liberal Party in State Politics

It remains a truism of Australian political history that the Labor Party and its significant figures attract far greater critical attention than their political opponents, and this is even more acutely the case at State level. The virtual eclipse of the ALP as a governing party for much of the three decades after World War II has been well documented in studies of the Split<sup>24</sup> and of key political leaders such as Evatt<sup>25</sup> and

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 626.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Murray, *The Split: Australian Labor in the Fifties*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984; Paul Ormonde, *The Movement*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1972; Ross Fitzgerald, *The Pope’s Battalions: Santamaria, Catholicism and the Labor Split*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2003. Useful accounts are also found in the memoirs of some key participants: Jack Kane, *Exploding the Myths: The Political Memoirs of Jack Kane*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989; Frank McManus, *The Tumult &*

Calwell<sup>26</sup>, and also in general histories,<sup>27</sup> but the years of the quite remarkable political ascendancy for the Liberals, nationally, and in Victoria especially, have not attracted anything like the same degree of interest among scholars. Nevertheless, given the dominance of the non-Labor parties in the crucial post-war era, their impact on the political landscape was considerable, and is deserving of greater and more extensive examination. Katharine West's seminal *Power in the Liberal Party* (1965)<sup>28</sup> still serves as a useful historical road map while the comprehensive *National and Permanent?* (2000) by Ian Hancock<sup>29</sup> explains in detail how the Liberal Party edifice was constructed, not only taking the process through from idea to completion, but also explaining the often unseen role of the party machine in electoral success (as well as failure). Aimer's study of Victoria<sup>30</sup> provides useful background and context.

This thesis seeks to fill some of these gaps in looking at the Liberal Party's performance in the two largest States in the post-war era that saw the Liberals achieve an unprecedented electoral dominance. Conventional wisdom tends to suggest that the Liberals were merely occupying a political vacuum left by a Labor Party in disarray, and this view has largely prevailed as broad brush political history.<sup>31</sup> Labor's failure in these years has meant success for non-Labor, but that success has not been entirely passive and understandable only in terms of Labor's troubles. It is within this context that this thesis constitutes an attempt to examine various aspects of political leadership in the Liberal Party, largely from a perspective focusing on two successful State Liberal leaders – Henry Bolte (Victoria) and Robin Askin (New

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*the Shouting*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977; B. A. Santamaria, *Santamaria: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> The most comprehensive is Peter Crocker, *Evatt: A Life*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993. Burt see also the more hagiographic *Doc Evatt: Patriot, Internationalist, Fighter and Scholar*, by Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale and Wayne Reynolds, Nelson, Melbourne, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> Colm Kiernan, *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1978. Calwell's own writings are also useful: *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, Cheshire-Lansdowne, Melbourne, rev. ed., 1965, and *Be Just and Fear Not*, O'Neil, Hawthorn, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill, the Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party, A Study in Australian Politics*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent? The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria*, James Bennett, Sydney, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> The study by D. W. Rawson, *Labor in Vain? A Survey of the Australian Labor Party*, Longmans, Croydon, 1966, is a prime example of this.

South Wales). In neither background nor manner could they be regarded as typical Liberal leaders, and they differed significantly from the (unsuccessful) leaders who preceded them. In their ready and apparent identification with ordinary men and women — and in most respects except for choice of occupation they were ordinary men themselves — they realised the hopes of the founders of the modern Liberal Party, such as R. G. Casey, that it would extend its appeal beyond the narrow confines of its predecessors and seek not only to reach out to ordinary Australians in their everyday concerns, but actually *engage* with them.<sup>32</sup> They spoke a colloquial language that the main non-Labor political party had not been able to learn, let alone articulate, in the past.

In terms of what the Liberal Party set out to do (and what the United Australia Party had palpably not done) in building a permanent organisation and a mass membership, Bolte and Askin did in their respective States what Menzies did nationally: articulate a pragmatic political message that transcended economic class, social status and religious creed. They brought to the Liberal Party new voters who had never before voted Liberal. Their electoral success signalled the arrival of the Liberal Party as more mass-based (or more precisely, a far more catch-all) party than its predecessors, not just in terms of its organisation and membership but also in terms of its *appeal*.

The non-Labor side of politics experienced a serious loss of confidence in the 1940s as its electoral stocks slid dramatically. In the bitter aftermath of the Great Depression and in the uncertain handling of the war effort in the first Menzies Government (1939-41), non-Labor was in serious decline and was seen to be increasingly irrelevant, venting what feeble energies it retained on internecine conflict. The resurrection of the 79-year-old Billy Hughes as leader of the United Australia Party after the resignation of Robert Menzies was a striking symbol of the lack of vitality in the UAP and its cause. In Victoria, the party had been effectively sidelined since 1935 by an alliance between the Country Party and Labor while in New South Wales the UAP-Country Party government slid quietly into oblivion in 1941 as the ALP shrugged off the influence of J. T. Lang, elected a new and

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<sup>32</sup> See p. 72.

appealing leader in William McKell and surged back into office in what was to be the beginning of a record 24-year term. The twilight of coalition rule in the largest State had been unhappy, and government came almost to a standstill in terms of reconstruction after the Depression, descending, as one writer put it, into ‘stagnation [where] dissent multiplied and personal ambition flourished’.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the all-important public perception, the UAP had ceased to be ‘dinkum’. It was no longer seen as representing popular aspirations; its perception was of a self-serving and squabbling oligarchy remote from the problems and issues of everyday Australians, and lacking the legitimacy to be considered a viable alternative to Labor as the party of government.

There was a growing recognition that a new party arrangement was essential if liberalism were to be revived, and thought began to be given in some quarters to a new approach. Prominent in this period was the effort put in by Menzies, both in resurrecting his political career and in carving out and defining a new constituency which he did in his radio broadcasts through 1942, appealing to the ‘forgotten people’.<sup>34</sup> Others looked askance at the dispirited rabble that the UAP had become, and one critic, Ernest White, laid the blame on, among other things, poor candidates.<sup>35</sup> This theme expressed in less blunt fashion was to be taken up in the higher echelons of the new Liberal Party that would rise out of the ruins of the UAP, as men such as R. G. Casey and W. H. Anderson would speak frequently of the failure in the past to engage with the average Australian. The new party, they insisted, had to prove its *bona fides*; it had to prove it was *dinkum* before the people would invest their trust in it.

Manning Clark remained fascinated by the notion of the ‘dinkum Aussie’, seeing in its rise as a character type and set of social perceptions the first stirrings of a distinctive Australian social culture. Its most striking characteristic was the Australian accent.

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<sup>33</sup> John McCarthy, ‘The Stevens-Bruxner Government 1932-1939’, unpublished MA thesis, University of NSW, 1967, p. 282.

<sup>34</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20

## *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Introduction*

We can communicate with each other. We don't always communicate with words, do we? We are not a very articulate people. We often communicate with groans and with grunts. But we do know and we do understand each other when we speak — and that is all that matters. But where it all came from, and how it started, remains a mystery. There are all sorts of views about the influence of the wind, the sun, and so on. Indeed there are all sorts of people trying to pluck out the heart of our mystery about the dinkum Aussie — the way he speaks, the words he uses, and the noise he makes when he uses those words.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, to be dinkum was dependent on how one said something just as much as it was on what was said; it was, in essence, a *communicative* process. Implicit in this attempted definition is the quality of a relaxed ordinariness in speech that has its expression in manner as well. Political leaders with this stamp became star players in the post-war Liberal ascendancy in Australia.

□□□

The Liberals in Victoria pre-Bolte and in New South Wales pre-Askin were poor relations indeed to the successful political machine that Menzies and others built and on which the coalition surged to office in 1949. In Victoria, the Liberals had suffered two damaging splits in seven years, and its leadership was inept at best. Hollway, the only Liberal Premier before Bolte, was unable to control tensions within his own party (indeed, he was the cause of many of them), and in any case preferred to govern in consultation with a small circle of advisers outside the party. When Hollway was deposed, the Liberals elected a brooding and intense former prisoner-of-war, Les Norman, who lost his seat without ever making an impact, and then turned to a party stalwart, Oldham, who soon after died in an air crash. When Bolte became leader of a mere cricket team of Liberals in 1953, confronting not only a majority Labor Government and a hostile Country Party, but also a clutch of dissident Liberals under Hollway known first as the Electoral Reform Group and later the Victorian Liberal Party, he faced a very uncertain future. But owing to internecine warfare inside the ALP, he was Premier within two years — and held the job, unchallenged, for 17 years. He displayed not only political skills of a high order that maximised his undoubted good fortune, but he brought to the office man management skills that

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<sup>36</sup> C. M. H. Clark, 'The British Philistine or the Dinkum Aussie', in G. C. Bolton (ed.), *Everyman in Australia: The Octagon Lectures 1970*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1972, pp. 4-5.

helped transform a motley rabble into a disciplined government that gave, and received, loyalty.

In New South Wales, the non-Labor parties had been in opposition for 18 years by the time Askin was elected to the Liberal leadership after the 1959 election defeat. To many, both in the party and outside it, the Liberal Party in that State was doomed to be a permanent opposition. Four leaders had come and three had gone in as many years — Treatt, a Rhodes Scholar, barrister and decorated war hero; Robson, a socialite solicitor and former lieutenant-colonel; and Morton, a successful businessman from a political family. Despite a professional party organisation, at the parliamentary level the Liberals were still in many ways a pre-modern party with most members engaged in business and two even ran industry organisations. Askin, a former bank employee and army sergeant, changed all that. He declared himself when he became leader ‘a professional politician’. It was a line drawn in the sand that signified a real break with the past and an entirely new approach. The era of Liberals in New South Wales being part-time politicians was over.

Interestingly, both Bolte and Askin served as non-commissioned officers in World War II whereas the majority of those who served under them had been officers. There was a knockabout quality to both men who had been active in sport and social groups for many years, and their military experience was also relatively rough-hewn in comparison to their commissioned brothers. It is argued here that it was precisely these qualities that enabled both Bolte and Askin to feel at ease among people; this worked at both a parliamentary level where keen people management was required and also at the electorate level where a sense of purpose and reliability needed to be communicated. Their public images of beer drinkers who liked a bet on the horses and went to the football resonated with the electorate in a way that no Liberals had managed before and few have since.

Two other successful modern Liberal leaders, David Brand in Western Australia and Thomas Playford in South Australia, also came from socially modest NCO backgrounds and, like Bolte and Askin, possessed the political skills and wide appeal that attracted trans-party voters. Again, they were able to bring stability to bear, and both men attributed their political success, in part, to their military experiences serving in the ranks.

On a broader scale, this thesis seeks to examine the paths to power, the *modus operandi*, and the achievements and legacies of Bolte and Askin in relation to that remarkable post-war phenomenon, the Liberal ascendancy, that saw 23 years of unbroken coalition rule in the Commonwealth, 27 years in Victoria, ‘the jewel in the Liberal crown’, and an unprecedented decade in office in New South Wales, a traditionally Labor State. In one brief instant, at its apogee, in 1969 every State as well as the Commonwealth, had a Liberal or coalition government. The aim here is to examine this ascendancy and seek to determine why the Liberals were so dominant in the post-war years and to illuminate the role that political leadership played in this dominance. Apart from the disastrous split in the ALP which, to many voters, undermined Labor’s claims to legitimacy as an alternative government, there were other reasons why the coalition parties were more attuned to the times, not least among these the markedly higher number of ex-service personnel in their ranks. In an age of insecurity and fear that followed on from a long war and a depression, the presence of ex-service personnel was not only reassuring, but it also underscored claims to legitimacy at a time when loyalty and national security were issues of prime concern to the electorate.

At the macro level, this thesis sets out to track how the Liberals, especially at State level, set about demonstrating their *bona fides* to an electorate that had, quite justifiably, developed a lingering scepticism about the capabilities and genuineness of the non-Labor cause, especially as it was represented by the effete United Australia Party. Clearly, a new message had to be devised along with new ways of communicating it.

Another significant but often overlooked development in the post-war years was the change in voting habits of Australia’s Catholic population which had previously been solidly pro-Labor. The ructions in the ALP over communist influence and the ensuing split shattered this allegiance when many Catholics left or were expelled from the Labor Party and went over to what became the Democratic Labor Party. Its preferences proved vital in supporting Menzies and Bolte. A good indication of Bolte’s political style is seen in his pro-active role in hastening the fall of the Cain Labor Government in Victoria. The Labor dissidents with whom he was dealing on an almost daily basis prior to the fall were, in the main, hard boiled political veterans

of ALP and union politics; they would have, as a group, little empathy with ‘Liberal silvertails’ but in the figure of Bolte they found not only a man who spoke the same language, but moved in the same circles of pub and racecourse. In New South Wales, during the debate over State aid to non-government schools, which became a decisive factor in Askin winning government in 1965, Askin showed canny political skills in dealing with Catholic activists seeking aid for their schools while at the same time treading cautiously with his own party, sections of which harboured deep sectarian sentiments.

Finally, in the light of this ascendancy, this thesis examines the broader issue of leadership in the Liberal Party, drawing extensively on the Bolte and Askin experiences, and seeking to identify the dynamics of their leadership.

#### (iv) Defining a Political Era

Defining a political era is akin to defining a generation: it is not always easy to determine with any great precision where one starts and ends (except of course in crude terms of electoral success or defeat which do not always equate with influence). Thirty years after Henry Bolte left political life in Victoria there is still occasional mention of the ‘Bolte era’ in that State, its meaning often dependent on the political conviction of the speaker. To many older people, who had known the war and perhaps even the Depression, it was an era of growth, development, progress and prosperity; to a rising younger generation, it was a time of crass expansionism, of a develop-at-all-costs mentality regardless of the price; it was an era of authoritarian rule with little room for dissent. The reality is a bit of both, and also a reinforcement of Bolte’s utter dominance. A later assessment of the period concluded that ‘few political leaders at the State level have had Sir Henry Bolte’s public appeal’.<sup>37</sup>

While the ‘Askin era’ is not quite so common usage in New South Wales, it is fair to say that both leaders came to typify a highly personalised political approach that delighted (but sometimes dismayed) their supporters and enraged their opponents. Askin, for his part, brought a steely professionalism to the parliamentary party that

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<sup>37</sup> Brian J. Costar & Colin A. Hughes, ‘Introduction’, *Labor to Office: The Victorian State Election of 1982*, Drummond, Blackburn, 1983, p. xi.

had been conspicuously lacking with many members heavily engaged in business and professional pursuits to the detriment of their commitment to the parliament. Askin led by example and brought about a noticeable change in attitude. Both leaders grew old in office and perhaps overstayed; each represented a worldview that was increasingly less shared by others, especially younger and higher-educated voters. Their youthful, dynamic, reformist characteristics, so evident early in their respective governments, gradually turned sour as they grappled with a world grown increasingly strange to them. It would be fair to say that the eras of both men — that is, the periods in which their influence and regard were at their peak — were in rapid decline in the last years of their time in office. Both came to typify in the minds of many voters a world that had passed. Bolte had become in Victoria a lightning rod for dissent, and Graham Little was able to write in a study of oppositional political style: ‘Anti-conscription, anti-Bolte, pro-sexual liberation: three issues that in themselves have been a whole political life and theory for generations of Melbourne students’.<sup>38</sup>

The values that shaped the political styles of Bolte and Askin had been forged in an earlier era, driven by wartime experiences and the demands of a post-war Australia that craved security and prosperity. The men who just a few years earlier were seen as the avatars of political change and material progress were now seen by many as grumpy, old men, seeking to cling to a view of society that was increasingly sclerotic. Bolte, for example, failed to discern how society’s views had changed in relation to issues such as capital punishment and the environment, and his obstinate insistence on having his way brought him into conflict with sections of society which, in many instances, might have been natural allies. Askin, also, failed to see that issues such as communism no longer resonated in the public mind as much as they had, nor did he come to appreciate that in a politics increasingly influenced by television, public accountability by way of accessibility was part of the new paradigm. The frontier mentality — the bold conquering of new realms, the championing of development and growth — was no longer the force it once was in the latter part of the Liberal ascendancy, and Bolte and Askin appeared increasingly anachronistic to sections of

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<sup>38</sup> Graham Little, *Politics and Personal Style*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1973, p. 27. Little adds in an appendix: ‘Henry Bolte, Liberal Premier of the State of Victoria, was the *bête noir* of Victorian students and “progressives” for the twenty-three years [*sic*] of his reign. And almost the sole source of interest in State politics’. p. 146.

the electorate who were in tune to a politics quite different from the one that shaped the age before it. It was, as Little has described it, a confluence of the personal and the political in which a 'new set of heroes would exclude the Big and the Bluff, would list instead anyone who is experimenting with personal meanings, life-styles, relationships...' <sup>39</sup>

If leadership is as much about attaining power as it is about preserving and perpetuating it, Bolte and Askin (and for that matter, Menzies) have left questionable legacies in that regard. The dominance of a single individual in a party like the Liberal Party works against any long-term vision of adaptability and survival, but Bolte stands out here in a way that Menzies and Askin do not. Bolte, in his crucial anointing of Rupert Hamer as his successor, at least acknowledged that the climate was changing and a leader of a very different hue was required, but while Hamer proved to be a leader in his own right, entrenched opposition within his own ranks suggested that large segments of the party had not moved with the times, and echoes from the 'Bolte era' continued to act as a political benchmark that worked to his detriment.

If Bolte and Askin were ruggedly atypical Liberal leaders (and a key argument of this thesis is that this atypicality was necessary for their initial success), it is interesting that their preferred successors, in each case, represented very much a reversion to type. Hamer in Victoria was a lawyer from a wealthy, private school background, and ex-officer; Lewis in New South Wales, was a primary producer, member of an influential moneyed family, private school, ex-officer. The experiment, it seemed, was over.

As to their politics, Bolte and Askin were essentially pragmatic, but each pragmatic in a way that was dictated by the immediate environment. Bolte was an old-fashioned conservative who saw nothing ambiguous in championing private enterprise while running a State characterised by large state-owned and relatively independent instrumentalities; to him, the agencies of government were there to serve the people (an attitude that would have been reinforced by his rural background and the reliance

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

of primary producers on government services). Bolte also had a strong religious streak to his character that Askin did not (he was an agnostic); he believed in the notion of duty, and he tended to see government as a bulwark against anarchy and depravity. His views on capital punishment, so crucial in the Ryan hanging in 1967, were simply part of a broader set of values.

...I've always believed that if capital punishment is to be retained it should be retained for people in authority to be protected, such as the police, the warder, the customs officer and those type of people who are doing the public duty, protecting the public and the public's property from being murdered and molested by people.<sup>40</sup>

Askin, who took some justifiable pride in moving his party towards the centre, exhibited a streak of populism that was, in his latter years, an embarrassment to his own supporters. The era that he had dominated was surely over when, in the context of the 1972 Federal election campaign, he attacked the ALP for advocating abortion on demand, homosexuality, a 'soft approach' to drug offenders and pornographers, and wanting to 'flood the country with black people'.<sup>41</sup> Public opinion had shifted in what became known as the 'permissive society', but Askin clung tenaciously to the past. In the meantime, the ALP was busy re-inventing itself with a smart, articulate, media-savvy new leader in Neville Wran; the Liberals were still in power but the Askin era had ended.

#### (v) Parallel Lives?

There are many similarities between Bolte and Askin, the greatest of which is that each was an outsider in terms of the accepted norms of Liberal Party leadership.<sup>42</sup> Neither was from a moneyed background (Askin's was in fact quite poor) and each served as an NCO in the army in a party that was predominantly of the officer class; and further, each led a Cabinet dominated by ex-officers. Each inherited a party that

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Sir Henry Bolte by Mel Pratt, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 11 February 1976, Oral TRC 121/73, 1:2/19.

<sup>41</sup> Murray Goot, draft entry on Askin in forthcoming *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 17, Melbourne University Press, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Even on the verge of Askin's succession to the Premiership, the media proprietor Sir Frank Packer, according to Donald Horne, was concerned that the Liberal Party was not giving their own man 'a fair go'; there was concern that 'he was only a sergeant in the war...not enough rank'. (Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2000, p. 96).

was deeply divided and presided over a unifying process that was characterised by loyalty; neither was ever challenged for the duration of their leadership; each chose the timing of his departure from politics; and each was instrumental in the election of a successor. Why were these apparent outsiders so accepted, so unchallenged, and so successful?

This thesis argues that their differentiation from the norms of their parties was very much a source of their strength and appeal as leaders. They broke the perceived class nexus that had divided parties and their background as NCOs rather than officers in the aftermath of World War II laid an emphasis on teamwork that had been noticeably lacking in previous non-Labor parties. They led rather than commanded. Their demeanour was that of the ordinary person, their habits those of the average Australian; their immediate appeal cut across fault lines that had previously been defined by an unspoken class affiliation; the language they spoke and the symbols they represented were of the sergeants' mess, not the officers' mess.

Each in his own way also represented a type that was in keeping with perceptions of their respective States,<sup>43</sup> especially the capital cities: Bolte, who had religious beliefs (and once even contemplated a career as a preacher) was wary of issues deemed to be in the moral domain, as much from personal conviction as from strategic considerations in keeping the DLP firmly on side. Victoria's laws on censorship, for example, were stringent; Sunday newspapers were forbidden; cinema hours on the sabbath, when they were at last allowed to open, were restricted; hotels closed at 6pm until 1966.

Askin, very much a Sydney man, professed no religious conviction; he was, like his city, free and easy-going in attitude and politics. His own attitude to authority had a certain cavalier streak, no better exemplified than in a story recounted by his former adviser, Geoffrey Reading, about an event some six months after he became Premier, when the Victorian prison escapees, Ryan and Walker, were on the run and believed to be hiding in Sydney. Askin was being dropped off at the races at Randwick by his driver when a young police constable remonstrated with the driver who had stopped

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of these perceptions see J. W. Berry, 'The Stereotypes of Australian States', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, vol. 21 no. 3 (December 1969), pp. 227-33.

in a zone designated 'No Setting Down'. Askin intervened, asking the constable to fetch his sergeant and telling both men that he wanted to see them in that spot after the last race.

When Askin returned after the last race, the constable and his sergeant were standing at attention at the appointed place, and also lined up were what looked like half the police force. There were sergeants and crown sergeants, and inspectors and superintendents. Askin told the gathering what had happened. His speech was brief. 'There is a man wanted for murder on the loose in this city,' he said. 'His name is Ronald Ryan. He has fled from Melbourne. If the police cannot recognise their own Premier, what chance do they have of recognising Ryan? That is the end of this matter. I am sure this young constable has learned his lesson, and I want no further action taken against him'.<sup>44</sup>

It was this free and easy approach by Askin that offended Bolte, and it appears that the two men did not care for one another, as an incident related by Bolte suggests. He had called on Askin at his Sydney office and they talked about horse racing. Askin asked Bolte if he had a 'good thing' at the races that day and Bolte said that as it happened he had, and mentioned the name of the horse.

...he immediately made a phone call and placed a heavy bet, heavy by my standards anyway. Askin told me he was betting with his SP (*illegal starting price*) bookmaker. It was embarrassing, but what could I do? I think the horse won, but I didn't give Askin any more tips. I wouldn't have done a thing like that in a million years in Victoria.<sup>45</sup>

Askin, for his part, regarded Bolte as being too parochial. He recalled that at Premiers' Conferences Bolte 'concentrated almost exclusively on what was good for Victoria and didn't worry quite enough on occasions about what was good for the nation'.<sup>46</sup> He felt that Bolte, who had been Premier for a decade when Askin arrived, resented the newcomer at first, but felt that 'after that we got along pretty well together'.<sup>47</sup>

Looming large over any discussion of the history of the Liberal Party, and especially of the issue of leadership, is the glowering shadow of Robert Menzies. Menzies, it is true, came from a position of scepticism in the eyes of the electorate to a position of

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<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Reading, *High Climbers: Askin and Others*, John Ferguson, Sydney, 1989, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Prior, *Bolte by Bolte*, Craftsman, Burwood, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Sir Robert Askin by Mel Pratt, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 7 and 11 October 1976, Oral TRC 121/83, 2:1/37.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 2:1/36.

dominance, just as the Liberal Party itself did; yet did he prove himself to be, as the Liberal founders hoped, *dinkum*?

In a broad sense he did, though not in the same way that ensuing leaders in the field of State politics did, which suggests significant differences in the respective domains — one overarching, so to speak; the other almost personal. Menzies displayed a *gravitas* that became a trademark; men like Bolte and Askin exhibited a folksy earthiness that was almost the opposite, yet *dinkum* in the strongest colloquial sense. They were, however, no less authoritative as leaders. Indeed, Menzies himself grappled with these distinctions when seeking to explain the appeal of Henry Bolte, noting that Australian people were not interested in ‘philosophical disquisitions’ by their political leaders, and displayed an ‘instinctive resistance’ to being talked down to. He continued:

Whenever Henry Bolte came out with an impromptu observation on some matter presented to him by a Press report, I confess that I used to worry a little. But I was wrong. By the time his observations had been reported in the Press, most people were saying: ‘Good old Henry, he speaks what’s on his mind’. Now that, properly considered, is a wonderful democratic attribute. It made him familiar to all Victorians and, indeed, to many thousands of people in other States. He was, and is, a man’s man.<sup>48</sup>

In popular parlance, a man’s man was to be ‘a good bloke’. This was someone who rubbed shoulders with all comers, and was devoid of the airs and graces of those who considered themselves superior. Menzies, who remains *sui generis*, was never in any doubt as to his own superiority. The leavening experience of war service, and the rough and leveling camaraderie that it generates, were never part of his make up. For all his appeal. Menzies lacked the *colloquial* appeal of his more plain spoken State colleagues. This is apparent in his openly paraded attachment to England – ‘the locus of Menzies’ ideals, the ultimate source of value in his political world...’<sup>49</sup> It was also apparent in his ‘well-modulated voice with its full vowels and clearly enunciated consonants, the sort of voice which conveyed education, confidence and respect for

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<sup>48</sup> The Rt Hon Sir Robert Menzies, foreword in Barry Muir, *Bolte From Bamganie*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1973, p. *viii*.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Brett, ‘Robert Menzies and England’ in Brett (ed.) *Political Lives*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, p. 71.

England'.<sup>50</sup> In the Australia of the time, it denoted a certain class and station in life; it was not the voice of the public bar or the outer at a sporting arena.

To what extent any Minister could oppose Menzies is problematic. One junior Minister observed in a diary entry: 'He led by dominating, not by team work'.<sup>51</sup> That his lofty demeanour and sometimes awesome imperiousness invited sycophancy is beyond doubt; Howard Beale later observed that there were 'a few ministers who held the prime minister's judgement in such respect that they thought they ought to agree with him on all matters'.<sup>52</sup>

Menzies was always conscious of his own gifts – perhaps too much so. He had an unfortunate tendency, remarked on by many, to denigrate and belittle those whom he did not like.<sup>53</sup> One Minister recalled after having been accorded the honour of moving the Address-in-Reply speech encountering Menzies next day who, to the Minister's dismay, by 'words and gestures ridiculed my apparent nervousness when beginning my speech the night before...'.<sup>54</sup> Even as the youthful Attorney-General in the Victorian Government under the patrician Sir Stanley Argyle, Menzies displayed a brash arrogance that would remain his hallmark, telling the Premier when his nomination for a Supreme Court appointment was queried: 'You will have my nomination or you will have my resignation'.<sup>55</sup> Billy Snedden, later to be appointed Attorney-General by Menzies, never forgave the Prime Minister for publicly humiliating him on the floor of the House, and an angry Snedden promptly wrote out his resignation. He later withdrew it after unsuccessfully seeking an apology to which Menzies replied loftily: 'My boy, you must understand that Prime Ministers do

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<sup>50</sup> Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, Sun Australia, Chippendale, 1992, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Howson in Don Aitkin, (ed.), *Peter Howson. The Howson Diaries. The Life of Politics*, Viking, Ringwood, 1984, p. 203.

<sup>52</sup> Beale, Howard. *This Inch of Time: Memoirs of Politics and Diplomacy*, Melbourne University Press, 1977 p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p.106. Beale, who did not get on well with Menzies, writes of his 'strange compulsion, in certain moods, to wound and humiliate'. He would sometimes seek to irritate Beale by calling him 'Oliver', his first Christian name which he did not use. (Conversation with author and Beale's son, Julian Beale). Beale was also not afraid to stand up to Menzies, or for that matter, for any other Minister who he believed to be right, no matter that it would place him in a minority. (See Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text, Melbourne, 1997, p. 68).

<sup>54</sup> Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Story as told to him by Menzies recounted by Billy Snedden in B. M. Snedden and M. Bernie Schedvin, *Billy Snedden: An Unlikely Liberal*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1990, p. 54.

not apologise to junior ministers; but if it is any consolation to you I can tell you that I understand what you are saying'.<sup>56</sup> Menzies' own muted *mea culpa* on his first prime ministership, in which he frankly admitted that his 'knowledge of people, and how to get along with them and persuade them, lagged behind' was only ever partly addressed.

I was still in that state of mind in which to be logical is to be right, and to be right is its own justification. I had yet to acquire the common touch, to learn that human beings are delightfully illogical but mostly honest, and to realise that all-black and all-white are not the only hues in the spectrum.<sup>57</sup>

These criticisms would not be made of the worldly State leaders who would come after Menzies, the men who would lead rather than just command.

#### (vi) Structure, Methodology and Sources

This thesis begins with an outline of the political landscape in the 1940s that gave rise to the new Liberal Party of Australia, and especially of the uncertain start it had in New South Wales and Victoria where failure of leadership was very much in evidence. The victory by Menzies in 1949 marked the start of the great post-war era of prosperity and began what became a Liberal ascendancy which, by 1969, saw the Liberals in government in every State as well as the Commonwealth. The rise of Bolte and Askin is tracked in separate chapters with an emphasis on what preceded them and how they were different. Finally, some general conclusions are drawn about leadership styles in the Liberal Party at both State and national level.

In terms of methodology, extensive use has been made of oral history interviews with both Bolte and Askin, and to a lesser extent similar interviews with other contemporary figures. It has not always been possible to corroborate information from these interviews, and therefore they need to be read with a certain caution, especially when they relate to events many years before and which were being recalled imperfectly (or even self-servingly) by ageing men no longer active in political life. Contemporary newspaper sources have also been used extensively both to track issues and to identify developments, and reaction to them, in their original

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

political and social contexts. In New South Wales, extensive use has been made of the political coverage of the *Sydney Morning Herald* which, far more than any other newspaper, has chronicled the vicissitudes of the Liberal Party at State level, often in minute detail. As an interested observer (interested in the sense of being staunchly pro-Liberal in leading articles at election time), the *Herald* was very much a key player in the political game. Limited but useful personal interviews have been conducted with surviving key figures. Official papers of the Liberal Party in Victoria and New South Wales and from the Federal secretariat have been consulted as have the private and public papers deposited in archives from some relevant political figures of the time. A wide range of secondary sources has been used to broaden the perspective on the era and take into account varying, and often conflicting, interpretations of events.

Apart from the studies mentioned above by West, Aimer and Hancock, the Liberal Party remains seriously under-represented in political writing. Judith Brett's incisive and penetrating 2003 study, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*,<sup>58</sup> was a welcome contribution to the literature, outlining and analysing the social dimensions of non-Labor, and provided significant background to this study. Henderson's 1995 and later revised retrospective look at the Liberals<sup>59</sup> is tendentious but slight. Useful critical studies of the Liberal Party have been made by Tiver,<sup>60</sup> Simms<sup>61</sup> and Jaensch,<sup>62</sup> while the troubles of the 1970s are examined by O'Brien.<sup>63</sup> The belated publication of the Menzies biography by A. W. Martin<sup>64</sup> filled a useful gap despite the picture noticeably fading towards the end of the period, and Menzies is captured in part by several other studies.<sup>65</sup> The recent publication of a scholarly biography on

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<sup>57</sup> Sir Robert Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Gerard Henderson, *Menzies' Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, (rev. edition) 1994.

<sup>60</sup> P. G. Tiver, *The Liberal Party: Principles and Performance*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1978.

<sup>61</sup> Marian Simms, *A Liberal Nation: The Liberal Party & Australian Politics*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982.

<sup>62</sup> Dean Jaensch, *The Liberals*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994.

<sup>63</sup> Patrick O'Brien, *The Liberals: Factions, Feuds & Fancies*, Viking, Ringwood, 1985.

<sup>64</sup> A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, Vol I 1894-1943, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993 and *Robert Menzies: A Life*, Vol 2, 1944-1978, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1979; Sir Percy Joske, *Sir Robert Menzies: 1894-1978 – a new, informal memoir*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1978; Sir John

John Gorton<sup>66</sup> was a welcome addition. The events set in train by the disappearance of Harold Holt in 1967, and the election of Gorton to succeed him are well covered, along with the intricate intrigue, in two journalistic studies by Alan Reid.<sup>67</sup> Useful studies of the Menzies years are to be found in the memoirs of several of his ministers,<sup>68</sup> as well as in the acerbic notes kept by Paul Hasluck and published posthumously.<sup>69</sup> The memoirs of Arthur Fadden<sup>70</sup> are marginally useful, but some immensely influential figures of the Menzies era, such as Holt and McMahon, still await detailed study. Casey, too, is done insufficient justice in Hudson's brief, though still useful, biography.<sup>71</sup>

Victoria, in some respects, is arguably the most neglected field of all, especially given its highly eventful political history. The extraordinary period of domination by the Country Party under the unscrupulous Albert Dunstan, who ruled for a decade from the mid-1930s, mostly with ALP support, is well documented by J. B. Paul,<sup>72</sup> and the intriguingly flawed career of Tom Hollway is examined by Kate White.<sup>73</sup> White has also written in depth of another key figure of that era, the Labor Premier John Cain.<sup>74</sup> Henry Bolte, the most successful Premier in Victorian history, has had two biographies<sup>75</sup> and a very useful oral history reflection on his career.<sup>76</sup> The chaos of the pre-Bolte Liberals is touched on in West and also in Aimer's 1974 study of the Liberals in Victoria, but neither addresses in detail the issue of leadership that so emphatically marked Bolte's term both as party leader and as Premier. One of

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Bunting, R. G. *Menzies: A Portrait*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988; Kevin Perkins, *Menzies: Last of the Queen's Men*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1968.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Hancock, *John Gorton: He Did it His Way*, Hodder Headline, Sydney, 2002.

<sup>67</sup> Reid, Alan. *The Power Struggle*, Tartan, Sydney, 1969; *The Gorton Experiment*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1971.

<sup>68</sup> The best are Howard Beale, *This Inch of Time: Memoirs of Politics and Diplomacy*, Melbourne University Press, 1977; Paul Hasluck, *Mucking About: An Autobiography*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1977; and Alexander Downer, *Six Prime Ministers*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1982. Robert Porter, *Paul Hasluck: A Political Biography*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1993, is also useful.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text, Melbourne, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur Fadden, *They Called Me Artie: The Memoirs of Sir Arthur Fadden*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1969.

<sup>71</sup> W. J. Hudson, W. J. *Casey*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986.

<sup>72</sup> J. B. Paul, 'The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan', unpublished MA thesis, Melbourne University, 1960.

<sup>73</sup> Kate White, 'Thomas Tuke Hollway: A Political Biography', unpublished MA thesis, Latrobe University, 1975.

<sup>74</sup> Kate White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Blazey, *Bolte: A Political Biography*, Mandarin, Port Melbourne, 1990; Barry Muir, *Bolte From Bamganie*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1973.

Bolte's ministers, and later Premier, Lindsay Thompson, has written a useful memoir,<sup>77</sup> while another Bolte minister has self-published an account of his life and political career.<sup>78</sup>

The long years of ALP rule in New South Wales have spawned a rich and detailed literature on Labor politics in that State. The Lang era has been covered extensively, and David Clune has documented quite admirably the 24 years of ALP rule from 1941.<sup>79</sup> Jim Hagan and Ken Turner have also done justice to the century of the Labor Party in that State.<sup>80</sup> The key figure that inaugurated Labor's post-Lang rebirth, William McKell, has also attracted serious study.<sup>81</sup> Of particular interest to the student of political history is the series on State elections<sup>82</sup> which details issues, personalities and media coverage in such a way as to take the reader back in time to the period being described. On the other side of the political fence, the Stevens Government, which came to power after Lang, has been well examined by John McCarthy<sup>83</sup> and the career of the Country Party strongman, Michael Bruxner, is chronicled by Don Aitkin,<sup>84</sup> who has also written a detailed study of the Country Party in New South Wales.<sup>85</sup> The watershed 1965 election, which saw a change of government, is well covered in a fascinating study of one seat<sup>86</sup> that nevertheless manages to capture many of the issues and personalities. The demise of the Liberals in 1976 ushered in a new era with a new-look Labor leader in Neville Wran, and

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<sup>76</sup> Tom Prior, *Bolte by Bolte*, Craftsman, Melbourne, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> Lindsay Thompson, *I Remember*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1989.

<sup>78</sup> Vernon Wilcox, *Minister of the Crown: A Personal Story of Life, Politics and People*, V. F. & J. R. Wilcox, Collingwood, 2001.

<sup>79</sup> David Clune, 'The Labor Government in NSW 1941-1965: A Study in Longevity in Government', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1991.

<sup>80</sup> Jim Hagan and Ken Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1891-1991*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 173.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Easson (ed.), *McKell: The Achievements of Sir William McKell*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988; Christopher Cunneen, *William John McKell: Boilermaker, Premier, Governor-General*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 2000.

<sup>82</sup> Hogan, Michael and David Clune (eds.), *The People's Choice: Electoral Politics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century New South Wales*, Vol. Two 1930-1965, Parliament of New South Wales/University of Sydney, Sydney, 2001.

<sup>83</sup> John McCarthy, 'The Stevens-Bruxner Government 1932-1939', unpublished MA thesis, University of NSW, 1967.

<sup>84</sup> Don Aitkin, *The Colonel: A Political Biography of Sir Michael Bruxner*, ANU Press, 1969.

<sup>85</sup> Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organisation and Survival*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972.

<sup>86</sup> John Power, (ed.) *Politics in a Suburban Community: The NSW State Election in Manly, 1965*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1968.

several studies of the Wran period<sup>87</sup> cast useful light not only on Wran but also on the dying days of the coalition. Askin has not had a biography, but a book alleging he was a friend of organised crime<sup>88</sup> brought him some infamy, while a long time staffer wrote a useful book in defence of Askin.<sup>89</sup> The feat of Askin, a man of humble birth and station, in taking over a party that had traditionally been led by Liberal bluebloods with conspicuous electoral failure and a long history of turmoil, and transforming it into an electoral winner, has received scant attention.

Elsewhere in terms of the post-war Liberal ascendancy, the phenomenally protracted rule of Thomas Playford (1938-65) in South Australia has attracted some interest,<sup>90</sup> although of admittedly parochial appeal, as has to a lesser extent the Liberal resurgence in Western Australia under David Brand from 1959, and later Charles Court.<sup>91</sup>

In the absence of systematic papers of most State politicians and the relative paucity of State archives, the work of the Oral History project at the National Library of Australia is of immense value to the scholar, and detailed use has been made of revealing (and apparently little consulted) interviews with both Bolte<sup>92</sup> and Askin.<sup>93</sup> Useful oral history interviews with Brand<sup>94</sup> and Playford<sup>95</sup> are also part of the collection.

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<sup>87</sup> Ernie Chaples, Helen Nelson & Ken Turner (eds.), *The Wran Model: Electoral Politics in New South Wales 1981 and 1984*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985; Brian Dale, *Ascent to Power: Wran and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985; Mike Steketee & Milton Cockburn, *Wran: An Unauthorised Biography*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986.

<sup>88</sup> David Hickie, *The Prince and the Premier*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Geoffrey Reading, *High Climbers: Askin and Others*, Ferguson, Sydney, 1989.

<sup>90</sup> Stewart Cockburn, *Playford: Benevolent Despot*, Axiom, Adelaide, 1991; Walter Crocker, *Sir Thomas Playford: A Portrait*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983; David Nicholas, *The Pacemaker: The Playford Story*, Brolga, Medindie, 1969; O'Neil, Raftery & Round, (eds.) *Playford's South Australia: Essays on the History of South Australia, 1933-1968*, Association of Professional Historians Inc., Adelaide, 1996.

<sup>91</sup> Ralph Pervan & Campbell Sharman (eds.) *Essays on Western Australian Politics*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979; C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Sir Henry Bolte, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, Mel Pratt Collection, Oral TRC 121/73.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Sir Robert Askin by Mel Pratt, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 7 and 11 October 1976, Oral TRC 121/83.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Sir Thomas Playford by Mel Pratt, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 2-4 February 1972. TRC 121/29.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Sir David Brand by Joan Ambrose, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, June-July 1977. TRC 548.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Introduction*

The author was fortunate to have known and observed both Bolte and Askin at close quarters in his work as a political journalist which afforded him a far more intimate view of the men and their style than is usually available to scholars.

# 1. THE ORIGINS OF LIBERAL REVIVAL

1.1. Conflicting Narratives of the 1940s: Golden Age or Crisis?

1.2. Towards a Liberal Revival

1.3. Failure of Leadership (1). Victoria: Revival then Chaos

1.4. Failure of Leadership (2). NSW: The Seeds of Liberal Despair

1.5. 'Dinkum' Leadership and the Post-War Zeitgeist

### 1.1. Conflicting Narratives of the 1940s: Golden Age or Crisis?

**IN THE** mythology of the Australian Labor Party, the years of what then comprised a record period of Labor rule from 1941 to 1949, stand as a veritable golden age,<sup>1</sup> not only for the fact that Labor led Australia through the most difficult period of the war, but that its two most revered and enduring heroes, John Curtin and Ben Chifley, shared the prime ministerial duties of those fateful years. It was in a very real sense the public affirmation of legitimacy for the ALP as a Federal governing party, its supporters only too keenly aware of the tragedies that befell it when called to office in the two preceding crises, which saw Billy Hughes leave the Labor camp over the conscription issue in World War I, and Joe Lyons join forces with non-Labor in the Depression crisis, each of them in their tergiversation going on to head governments of Labor's opponents. It was little wonder then, as Judith Brett has written, that the wartime ALP governments 'became high points

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: the Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1991, p. 253; L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley*, Longmans Green & Co, Melbourne, 1991, p 419; Ross McMullin, 'Joseph Benedict Chifley', in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland, Sydney, 2000, pp. 247-268. See, especially, Robert Murray, *The Split, Australian Labor in the fifties*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1984, p. 4: 'Between the defeats of 1949 and 1954, Labor had held the heady but unjustified belief that was the 'natural government' of Australia. With more justification, it felt that its administration from 1941 to 1949 had solved, or at least mitigated, the greatest problems of pre-war Australia, and had laid the foundations of the new prosperity which was depriving it of its power. The party's mood predominantly was of hunger for a return to office combined with pique against an electorate which kept it out; of nostalgia for the golden 1940s and unwillingness to understand the 1950s.' Note also the comment by John Warhurst: 'This period in national office has assumed greater importance within the Party than might otherwise have been the case because of the twenty-three years out of office which were to follow.' John Warhurst, 'The Labor Party' in Dennis Woodward, Andrew Parkin & John Summers (eds.), *Politics, Power & Society in Australia* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.), Longman, South Melbourne, 1997, p 170. See also the views of Dr Jim Cairns, an influential figure in the ALP Left post-war. '...Cairns regarded Labor's achievements in office during the 1940s as considerable. A few years later in his doctoral thesis, he identified this period, especially the years 1943-48, as having been characterised by a spirit of co-operation and unity of purpose...Writing more recently, Cairns has argued that the Chifley Government represented 'Laborism at its best', and effected 'the most substantial elements of social and economic policy' in Labor's history.' (Paul Strangio, *Keeper of the Faith: A Biography of Jim Cairns*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002, p. 62).

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in Labor's twentieth-century history ' as well as 'evidence for the comforting belief that in times of crisis the Australian people turned to Labor'.<sup>2</sup>

The ALP's ascendancy of the 1940s was also more than this setting the public record straight: it was the time when Labor's electoral stocks had never been so high as at the 1943 election,<sup>3</sup> an 'unprecedented triumph',<sup>4</sup> and it was the first time, in 1946, that a Labor government had been returned at successive elections. Indeed, one newspaper went so far as to proclaim that Australians were now living 'in an era of Labor'.<sup>5</sup> The prospects of post-war reconstruction offered the realisation of a socialist dream — a planned society, a society no longer at the mercy of boom-bust extremes, depression, mass unemployment and misery. The brave new world, it seemed, was close at hand, and was entirely within the provenance of the Australian Labor Party.<sup>6</sup>

Given the seismic shocks that had so shaken Australian society from its gentle slumber in the arms of Britannia — the disproportionate losses suffered in World War I, the onset and devastation of the Great Depression and then another war and the fear of invasion — it was by no means unreasonable that the party which represented itself as the engine of Australian nationalism<sup>7</sup> should seek to implement policies aimed at preventing any recurrence of recent hardship and suffering. Was it not a fact that *laissez-faire* policies had failed and resulted everywhere in economic catastrophe and social dislocation? Was it not obvious that Labor's political opponents were divided, untrustworthy and in any case beholden to the very interests whose actions precipitated the Great Depression and,

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Labor won 49.93 per cent of the primary vote. (Colin A. Hughes & B.D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1968, p. 369.)

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, *The Oxford History of Australia*, Volume 5, 1942-1988, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1990, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Geelong Advertiser*, 30 Sept 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Chifley himself spoke of the imminent 'golden age' in the course of the 1946 election campaign. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Sept 1946.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, A. A. Calwell, *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, Cheshire-Lansdowne, Melbourne, rev. ed., 1965, p. 8, pp. 12-20; Graham Maddox, *The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989, p. 142; E. G. Whitlam, 'Chifley Memorial Lecture', 14 Aug 1975, in E. G. Whitlam, *On Australia's Constitution*, Widescope, Camberwell, 1977, p. 196.

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most likely, created the conditions for World War II?<sup>8</sup> Surely, the Australian people had spoken plaintively and eloquently in 1943 when they so willingly entrusted the government and the war effort to John Curtin, and again in 1946 when they bestowed a mandate, albeit not so fulsome, on Ben Chifley?

On the other side of the political fence, there was concern; alarm even. The experience of wartime regulation had fuelled hopes that such government authority might also be used in peacetime to achieve greater socialisation of the economy; liberal and conservative ideas in Australia were very much under challenge.<sup>9</sup> The then Leader of the Opposition, Robert Menzies, recalled a period of deep despondency, noting that Labor could look to the future 'with great Socialist hopes'.

For the war, under both party administrations, had caused a tremendous growth in the powers of Government, in the all-pervading habit of receiving and obeying government orders. Private enterprise had grown accustomed to its chains. Private citizens had become familiar with the manifestations of the planned state; investment control, food rationing, petrol rationing, very high rates of taxation, government organisation of industry and transport.

If things were allowed to settle down into a continuance of this political pattern, Labour's future would be bright, and that of its opponents shadowy indeed.<sup>10</sup>

A prominent business figure and thinker, Sir Herbert Gepp,<sup>11</sup> wrote in 1943:

I am very gravely disturbed about the broad picture of Australia today and the apparent absence of constructive vision. I foresee an acute situation arising over the next six or twelve months unless some bold and imaginative national guidance and leadership is forthcoming.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-1941, Vol I, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, pp. 78-9; Stephen Holt, *A Veritable Dynamo: Lloyd Ross and Australian Labor 1901-1987*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996, p. 65; *SMH*, 25 March 1940.

<sup>9</sup> David Kemp, 'Liberalism and Conservatism in Australia Since 1944', in Brian Head and James Walter (eds.), *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 327.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Menzies, *Afternoon Light, Some Memories of Men and Events*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1959, p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Herbert Gepp (1877-1954), managing director Australian Paper Manufacturers.

<sup>12</sup> Institute of Public Affairs, Draft of paper for Australian Institute of Political Science summer school, 1943. Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University (hereafter NBAC)N136/2.

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Gepp, more so than most businessmen, was keenly aware of the generally unfavourable image of big business that had gathered momentum since the Depression, and he was at the forefront in seeking to reverse or at least modify this trend, especially in the formation of the Institute of Public Affairs.<sup>13</sup> The concerns of private enterprise were very real: the planning for post-war reconstruction, actually begun under the first Menzies Government in 1940,<sup>14</sup> predicated on a basis of full employment, posed under Labor a significant degree of threat in terms of the envisaged operating environment.

Alongside the examination of questions of the future of private industry, including such basic questions as the raising of capital while there was still capital issues control, there was advocacy of and planning for Government ownership of at least sections of industry.<sup>15</sup>

While later historians have generally, but not entirely, been dismissive of claims about socialist aims,<sup>16</sup> Labor's very platform demanded such action, and contemporary non-Labor opinion was adamant that this was being followed, certainly in relation to post-war planning, as Arthur Fadden,<sup>17</sup> briefly wartime Prime Minister, later wrote.

There is ample evidence that as early as 1942, the Labor Party was planning an active drive to implement socialisation when the war ended...Looking back, it is without question that the first step in Labor's grand design was launched by Dr Evatt in 1942.

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<sup>13</sup> C. D. Kemp, *Big Businessmen: Four Biographical Essays*, Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 1964, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Hasluck, *op .cit.*, p. 509.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 520.

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, for example, asserts that Labor's leadership 'had no wish to eradicate private enterprise, overseas investment or the profit motive', and that for Labor's opponents to accuse the ALP of introducing socialism was simply 'talking nonsense'. (Bolton, *Oxford History of Australia, op.cit.*, p. 27) However, for a different view see Tim Battin, 'Keynesianism, Socialism and Labourism, and the Role of Ideas in Labor Ideology', *Labour History*, No 66, May 1994, pp. 33-44. Battin argues that post-war reconstruction enabled the Curtin and Chifley Governments 'to breathe fresh life into Labor's socialist faith and ethos', (p 39) and that they were examples of governments 'characterised by socialist ideas and policies, tempered by legal constraints, yet continually testing the limits and pushing out the boundaries of public opinion'. (p 42).

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Fadden (1995-1973) MLA Qld 1932-35; MHR Darling Downs 1936-49, MHR McPherson 1949-58; Minister assisting the Treasurer, Minister for Supply, Minister for Air and Civil Aviation 1940, Treasurer 1940-41; Country Party Leader 1941-58, Prime Minister Aug-Oct 1941, Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer 1949-58.

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Early in October Evatt introduced a Bill for the amendment of the Constitution to give the Commonwealth sweeping powers in the post-war period.<sup>18</sup>

The powers proposed to be transferred from the States to the Commonwealth included those pertaining to employment, prices, production (including the marketing of primary produce), health, works and services, transport, housing and many others. Critics, especially in the Opposition, contended, and not without justification, that the provisions of the Bill would give the Commonwealth ‘power to control almost every sector of economic and social life and obliterated the States as effective units in the federation...’<sup>19</sup> A particular sticking point highlighted by the Opposition was that the Bill failed to indicate any limit to the period defined as ‘post-war reconstruction’ during which the Commonwealth would be authorised to use the powers, which could have been extended arbitrarily ‘for twenty, fifty or a hundred years’.<sup>20</sup> A commentator not unsympathetic to Labor and its program expressed surprise at the broad and sweeping nature of the move.

Some of these powers were expressed in the broadest, and even vaguest, terms and all were said to be specially exempt from High Court perusal and interpretation – which facts, taken together, would have given the Commonwealth Parliament all but complete legislative authority. The extraordinarily emotive, ‘catch-vote’ wording of the Bill as originally submitted gave the whole proposal a somewhat meretricious and ‘tricky’ air which never afterwards was successfully shed.<sup>21</sup>

Fadden discerned ‘the first concerted move’ towards socialism just as the war was ending in July 1945 when a Bill was introduced, described by the Government as one for ‘the nationalisation of interstate airlines’. The broad principles of the Bill were subsequently invalidated by the High Court. Chifley, who had just become Prime Minister after the death of Curtin, expressed the hope that the day was not far distant when all air transport, and not merely interstate airlines, would be under government control.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Fadden, *They Called Me Artie, The Memoirs of Sir Arthur Fadden*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1969, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> L. F. Crisp, *The Australian Federal Labour Party, 1901-1951*, Longmans Green, London, 1954, p. 253.

<sup>22</sup> Fadden, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

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The prospect of continuing wartime regulations coupled with hostility to business were the key factors in bringing about the formation of the Institute of Public Affairs, whose prime purpose was to improve the ‘image’ of business and educate the public about its workings. The early history of the IPA offers a fair reflection of the fears and anxieties that beset business at the time, as it saw ‘the freedom of Australian business...gravely threatened by forces whose unswerving and rigid purpose is the entire nationalisation of industry and the establishment of socialism as the permanent form of Australian society’.<sup>23</sup> It was not hard to see where these trends were leading: the eventual ‘elimination of private capital and shareholdings, profit, freedom of private enterprise and the transfer of the control of industry to civil servants and union leaders’.<sup>24</sup> This was the nature of the enemy and the enemy had political form. The forces that were arrayed against business and the free enterprise system in general were centred politically in the Australian Labor Party and industrially in the trade unions; they were also supported by ‘an extremely powerful and growing section of public opinion’.

By 1945 business was decidedly diffident about pressing its case yet fearful of the consequences of not doing so. A confidential assessment by the IPA of the prevailing industrial situation ahead of a national conference between employers and unions noted

the conviction (fostered by the spate of official and private propaganda poured out during the war urging the institution of some form of ‘new order’) that the end of the war should result immediately in some sweeping improvement in the social standards and way of life of the mass of the people.<sup>25</sup>

The war had served the ALP well, as business saw it. It had placed Labor in the position where it was able to regulate and control every phase of business, and it was using this

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<sup>23</sup> NBAC, IPA, N136/53. ‘Introductory summary’ of an undated paper by C. D. Kemp on the structure of the proposed IPA.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* The following passages are taken from same.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Report on National Conference Between Employers and Unions’, IPA, (n.d.) NBAC, N136/52, p. 1.

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position to 'erect a framework of widespread restrictions which it will endeavour to maintain and extend in the post-war period as a means of enforcing its policy of wholesale nationalisation of industry'. There were fears expressed that the ALP was taking its cue from the British Labour Party which had already submitted a resolution stating that there must be no return after the war to the unplanned competitive society and asserting that government wartime controls for mobilising national resources must be continued in peace time. Every utterance of ALP figures, especially ministers, was scrutinised, and business noted that in recent months 'different Cabinet ministers in this country have urged that the Government immediately take over certain basic industries', and that one Minister had even spoken of the 'iniquity of profits and interest'. As the post-war reconstruction program developed momentum, business looked with concern on an 'enormous new civil service armed with arbitrary and excessive powers under National Security Regulations...being built up'. The public servants so deployed were themselves identified as politically hostile because of their perceived 'direct personal interest in ensuring their future positions and constitute a new and powerful voting section with a vested interest in government control'. Trade unions, too, had been empowered and were demanding to be consulted before action was taken by the Federal Government while their policy of socialisation cut directly 'across the interests of employers and makes the achievement of industrial goodwill impossible'. Another related area of concern was the effort being made to achieve the legal enforcement of compulsory unionism which business feared would give the unions 'unprecedented economic and political authority and could well mean the destruction of the present capitalistic organisation of industry'. The 'political Labor Party' had much to gain from acceding to this request; in any case, it would find it extremely difficult to resist. Organised labour had taken on a sinister new hue, no longer being merely concerned with wages, conditions and the welfare of the workers; its 'true objective', rather, and one only faintly concealed, was 'to reconstruct the industrial and social life of Australia on an entirely new and revolutionary basis'.

Business had failed itself by neglecting to put its own side of the case constantly before the community, nor did it seek to follow economic and political trends on an organised

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basis with a view to influencing public opinion in its favour. But above all Kemp identified a *political* failure, sheeting home the blame to the then Opposition, the United Australia Party, for not having ‘succeeded in formulating views and policies which can be said to truly reflect those of the large majority of medium size and small business organisations’. He continued:

The fact that it has so far failed to evolve a definite, virile, and progressive policy with a strong appeal to the community as a whole is a serious flaw in the armor of business itself. For contrasted with this the Labour Party has a clearly defined goal which on the face of it offers a better life for the great mass of the people, - it has definite objectives, it is vigorous and unswerving in their pursuit and its aims can be stated in simple terms understandable by all.<sup>26</sup>

The embryonic IPA looked with scepticism on the way in which the Labor Party, and Curtin in particular, were lauded – ‘built up to great heights by press and benchmen’.<sup>27</sup> The ALP was seen as having claimed all the credit for Australia’s war effort<sup>28</sup> – a myth that has endured with remarkable tenacity given its flimsy basis in fact. In Labor mythology, Curtin has been lionised,<sup>29</sup> one biographer hailing him ‘as basically responsible for the leadership that united and inspired Australia in accepting the measures that were necessary to obtain national security and to participate in winning a world war against insatiable authoritarianism’.<sup>30</sup> The role of Menzies, as Prime Minister from 1939 to 1941, remains understated in popular appreciations of wartime organisation; in fact the contribution of Menzies was considerable. He devised and put into place principles which were observed for the duration of the war and created the basic organisation for munitions and construction which lasted throughout. He was also instrumental in drawing into that organisation men who under Curtin were largely responsible for its

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> NBAC, IPA, ‘Memorandum – Federal elections 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1943,’ Post-Mortem, p. 3. N136/74.

<sup>28</sup> Curtin himself was at the forefront of this, using his policy speech for the 1943 election to talk up Labor’s role. See *SMH*, 27 Sept 1943.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol VI, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1987, *passim*, but esp. p 496: ‘He was greatly loved. His political opponents praised him as the ‘best and fairest’ man in Australian public life, the charismatic leader, with an abundance of wisdom and understanding... He had had a great dream. He had dreamed that here in the South Pacific Australians would rear a nation that would be an example to all others. He never gave up that dream.’

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success. The 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the AIF were raised under Menzies and many of the notable Australian commanders, including Sir Thomas Blamey,<sup>31</sup> were appointed. The Empire Air Training Scheme was started, and the years 1940 and 1941 were years of substantial achievement, and the response in the early months of 1942 owed much to what had been done already.<sup>32</sup>

Much of the credit given to Labor for its war effort, according to the IPA, owed more to some deft public relations work than actual achievement, such as lifting of the brown-out, material releases and ‘the statement that we were now out of danger from invasion because of the Labor Party’s efforts’.<sup>33</sup> On the other side of the political fence, there was ‘the spectacle of disunity’, with too many open or silent contenders for leadership, and a lack of ‘any really well trained machine for field work or spreading our political creed...’ It was quite clear that business saw little value in the United Australia Party, the IPA observing that ‘a new political party or a complete re-organisation of the present one is absolutely necessary’.<sup>34</sup> The Australian Labor Party was perceived to be streets ahead in its organisation and approach, and there was an implied criticism of the quality of candidates offered by the UAP.

We must create something that will attract young people. At the moment there can be no question that in this field our opponents are a long way ahead of us. This should include the training of speakers, the formation of a model parliament, the early selection of candidates even as far as 2 years prior to an election in seats not now held. The women’s vote must also be attended to and live organisations created everywhere. Where necessary local candidates should be subsidised and given special facilities for training and educating themselves to assist the movement.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 387.

<sup>31</sup> Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey (1884-1952), GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO. GOC 6 Aust Div 1939-40, I Aust Corps 1940-41; Deputy C in C ME 1941; GOC in C AMF 1942-46.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945, Volume II, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 633. See also A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, Vol I 1894-1943, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 425-6; Clem Lloyd, ‘The Rise and Fall of the United Australia Party,’ in J. R. Nethercote (ed.), *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 161.

<sup>33</sup> NBAC, IPA, ‘Memorandum Federal elections, 1943,’ *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

## 1.2. Towards a Liberal Revival

**THE GENERAL** feeling of inadequacy on the non-Labor side coupled with an air of enveloping crisis is reflected in the musings of a prominent business figure, F. E. Lampe,<sup>36</sup> about the results of the 1943 Federal election, which he characterised as: ‘United they stood, divided we fell’.<sup>37</sup> He noted the care taken by the Labor Party not to reveal to the public any sign of dissension in its ranks, Curtin’s leadership contrasted with the lack of leadership in the UAP, disagreement between UAP and Country Party leaders on major points of policy, lack of a clear and constructive policy, political expediency, lack of organisation, the ‘possibility that the Labor Party is regarded as more Australian than the UAP [and] that the UAP is regarded as being more susceptible to English than to Australian influences’, the ‘gullibility of the public in accepting Mr Curtin’s half truths’ about the defence achievements of the Menzies Government, absence of unemployment and abundance of money attributed to Labor administration, a belief that Labor offered the best hope of post-war social security and avoidance of depression, and achievements of communism talked of in Russia as pointing to the desirability of socialism.

Lampe was concerned that while Labor was focusing on post-war reconstruction — and this policy was ‘becoming clarified...along bureaucratic lines’ — the two non-Labor parties, during the 1943 campaign, had merely spoken ‘more or less vaguely about the need to preserve private enterprise’. They had ‘completely failed’ to enunciate a policy that would be capable of avoiding depressions and other social evils that followed the 1914-18 war.<sup>38</sup> He noted remarks made by the director of Post War Reconstruction, Dr H. C. Coombs,<sup>39</sup> that ‘in future governments will participate to a greater extent in the

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<sup>36</sup> Frederic Ernest Lampe (1902-1972), retailer and businessman.

<sup>37</sup> F. E. Lampe, ‘Thoughts at Random on the Recent Election,’ 30 August, 1943. NBAC, IPA, N136/74, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>39</sup> Herbert Cole Coombs (1906-1997), Director-General, Post War Reconstruction 1943-49, later Governor of Reserve Bank of Australia 1960-68.

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control of industry and they will have to create a new type of personnel for this purpose'.<sup>40</sup>

While not advocating a return to *laissez faire*, which Lampe believed would 'lead to a disaster', any attempt to control the whole economy of Australia by a bureaucracy would be equally disastrous, and it would be preferable that participation by governments in industry be by direction and not by control. But much work remained to be done in promoting this outcome in opposition to 'a tyranny of complete domination by the state', and a political hiatus remained a major obstacle.

At present a large body of public opinion which is instinctively opposed to socialism and authoritarianism, is faltering and bewildered because the parties to which it looks for guidance have no definite creed able to command its steadfast allegiance.<sup>41</sup>

As discontent became more apparent and widespread, criticisms that once had been only whispered were now aired in public. Clearly, the United Australia Party was being seen increasingly as an inappropriate vehicle on which to mount a sorely needed liberal revival; it was obvious its days were numbered. Even the august *Sydney Morning Herald*, generally a supporter on the non-Labor side, was strongly critical of the malaise which had overtaken the Opposition parties, accusing them of representing 'vested interests' which, while not represented directly, were nevertheless organised 'through a clique of professional politicians who close their ranks to new talent'.<sup>42</sup>

Supporters themselves have been the first to complain that, except in moments of extreme stress, their organisation is notoriously lackadaisical and apathetic...If new talent is suggested to the UAP, there is a stereotyped reply that there are no seats available, and that 'Old Brown' or 'Old Robinson' would have a better chance of holding or winning this or that seat anyhow.

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<sup>40</sup> Lampe, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1943. While credited to 'A Political Observer', this and subsequent articles were written by the paper's chief proprietor, Warwick Fairfax, later collected under the title, *Men, Parties and Politics* (Sydney, 1943).

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During the campaign for the 1943 election, the perceived shortcomings of the Opposition parties were publicly paraded. The *Herald* made the point in a leading article that not only had they failed to make the case for an alternative government, they had even failed in the basic tasks of an opposition.

Having formed their opinion of the future of the Labour movement electors are likely to view opposing parties rather as avoiding some of the pitfalls threatened by Labour. They will expect criticism of Labour's industrial policy to be accompanied by alternative suggestions for handling strikes. They will expect reassurance on one or two constructive points – national insurance, a single army – whether they will be offered more remains to be seen from the Opposition Leader's policy. They know from previous experience that the administrative talent available is not great. They will be disturbed to see that up to this late hour nothing has since been done to remedy that deficiency. Their most fervent supporters will be hard-put to it to discover within the UAP or UCP [United Country Party] the germs even for the distant future of a strong and capably-led organisation with the national spirit wholeheartedly behind it.<sup>43</sup>

The UAP was being seen increasingly as irrelevant, both to the demands of the business community and to the so-called 'middle ground' which it needed if it was to achieve electoral success.<sup>44</sup> Its ability to match Labor, ideologically or politically, was constantly to be found wanting, and the comprehensive defeat inflicted in 1943 saw the UAP 'consigned to a wilderness of rising futility and desperation...'<sup>45</sup> Many organisations and individuals concerned at the growing centralist drift under Labor and the wartime regulations banded together in various manifestations, not entirely coherent and by no means enduring, that attempted to articulate a political tendency that had been left all but voiceless. The prominent businessman and later Federal president of the Liberal Party, T. M. Ritchie<sup>46</sup> echoed the sentiments of many when he said:

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<sup>43</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1943.

<sup>44</sup> John Lonie, 'From Liberal to Liberal: the Emergence of the Liberal Party and Australian Capitalism, 1900-45' in Graeme Duncan (ed.), *Critical Essays in Australian Politics*, Edward Arnold, Port Melbourne, 1978, p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> Lloyd, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Malcolm Ritchie (1894-1971), businessman and Liberal Party founder.

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It is obvious that the weakness of our opposition to the promotion of socialistic political thought and effort arises largely out of our failure to achieve a continuity of political effort by those citizens who do not share the socialistic viewpoints.<sup>47</sup>

There were two recurring themes in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* ongoing critique of the non-Labor malaise — the need to move away from simple anti-socialism and protection of vested interests ('obstructive conservatism') to a broader, more robust liberalism,<sup>48</sup> and greater consideration given to the type of candidate needed. The latter contained a prescient insight into the type of Liberal leaders who would emerge in the immediate post-war years, and addressed what the *Herald* had long identified as a pronounced lack of practical administrative ability in non-Labor ranks.

The notion so prevalent in the UAP and UCP that 'new blood' means getting hard-boiled graziers and business executives of 45 or 50 should be scrapped forthwith. Not only are such men apt to think in terms of commercial rather than of human values, but their very association with a certain industry or business tends to unbalance their view of the national affairs. There is no suggestion, of course, that able men in politics have not often been recruited from business classes, or that such classes should not be represented. Administrative capacity is obviously needed, but unlike political leadership, it is fairly plentiful in this country. The problem is only how to associate it with politics.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the pool of talent for leadership was as narrow as it was shallow; the class and social constraints of non-Labor merely churned out more of the same type of politician. If a new start were to be made — and this was the thrust of the *Herald's* argument — then serious attention needed to be given to the encouragement of more diverse talents, an issue that the later influx of ex-servicemen would address and in so doing provide leaders at State level such as Henry Bolte in Victoria, David Brand in Western Australia and even later Robin Askin in New South Wales. It was this subtle shift that helped provide the subsequent Liberal Party with the essential ingredient needed to build electoral success on its mass-base organisation — and that was mass appeal.

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<sup>47</sup> Speech to Darlinghurst branch, Liberal Party, 4 July, 1945. Ritchie papers, NLA, MS 2555, Box 1, speeches.

<sup>48</sup> *SMH*, 3 Sept 1943.

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It is not within the scope of this work to detail the birth of the Liberal Party other than to note that the driving force behind its creation was a combination of concern at the malaise that had overtaken Australian political life and fears of the direction post-war planning was already starting to take; it was conceived in crisis but deeply imbued with a new energy and heady idealism. One of the prime movers in getting the Liberal Party up and running, W. H. Anderson,<sup>50</sup> the Victorian State president, characterised Liberal thinking when he addressed the party in 1946: ‘The dead hand of a socialist government lies very heavily on this land. There is great apathy and dull, dead inertia to-day...’<sup>51</sup> Ritchie was of a similar view, and saw in post-war Australia the real need for political change.

We see in our country an unbalanced staggering towards control by bureaucracy, which makes free enterprise shudder at the prospects of our future if it continues unchecked...We seem determined to shackle free enterprise to such an extent as to reduce it to a minor role in our national economy.<sup>52</sup>

This message had also been used repeatedly with effect by Menzies, with an added sense of urgency overlaying it, and when he addressed the first Victorian State Council meeting of the new Liberal Party in 1945, his message was one of crisis.

I don't know whether everybody in Australia fully realises it yet, but nobody who is at all near the centre of politics in Australia can doubt that we are confronting the greatest political crisis in our history...Everybody has wanted to win the war; but when the war ends, in the period between the next election and the election after that...(W)e are going to enter a period in which the problems of government will be complex...I believe that far

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<sup>49</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Sept 1943.

<sup>50</sup> William Hewson Anderson (1897- 1968), chief accountant Shell Co of Australia 1935-50. President of the Victorian Division of the Liberal Party 1945-48 and Federal President 1951-56. His role in the formation of the Liberal Party was a significant one as it was in the first decade of its existence. Anderson was among the conservative critics of the UAP and had formed with others the Services and Citizens' Party, one of the splinter parties that later became part of the new Liberal Party.

<sup>51</sup> Address to Fifth State Council Meeting, 5 July 1946. University of Melbourne Archives (hereafter UMA), Liberal Party of Australia, Victorian Division, 1/1/2.

<sup>52</sup> T. M. Ritchie, speech to Federal Council meeting, Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne 2 Sept 1947. Ritchie papers, NLA, MS 2555, Box 1, speeches.

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too many thousands of people of our way of thinking in Australia have loafed on their political responsibilities for far too many years...<sup>53</sup>

In other words, those people on the side of liberalism had shirked the issue. It was another, though more perverse, way of saying that they had not been mobilised politically. This was the challenge.

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<sup>53</sup> R. G. Menzies, address to Meeting of First State Council, 19 June 1945, Melbourne. UMA, Liberal Party of Australia, Victorian Division, 1/1/2.

### 1.3. Failure of Leadership (1): Victoria: Revival then Chaos.

**THE LIBERAL** Party came into being in Victoria at a time of crisis in State politics. It was what Davies aptly termed ‘...this baroque period in Victorian politics...’<sup>54</sup>The UAP had been effectively shut out of government since 1935 in a deal between the Country Party and Labor; its own ineptitude coupled with the superior wiles of the other two parties saw it sidelined almost to the point of irrelevance. The years 1931-1944 have been described appropriately as constituting ‘an unheroic’ period in Victoria of continuous electoral decline.<sup>55</sup> The malaise that afflicted the UAP at Federal level was also apparent in Victoria where the party was divided as well as powerless. When the ageing Sir Stanley Argyle,<sup>56</sup> a respectable but dull and conservative medical specialist, died in 1940 he was succeeded by Tom Hollway<sup>57</sup> who, for a time, seemed to be the saviour the party needed, as effective and inspiring leadership was sadly lacking.

Thomas Tuke Hollway cut a dashing figure — an elegant country lawyer, as much at home among poets and painters as he was in the hurly-burly of the political fray. Implicit in several flattering press portraits of him<sup>58</sup> was the belief by some that he was the long-awaited circuit-breaker to arrive on the scene to challenge the gridlock that characterised Victorian politics, dominated as it was by the political veterans Albert Dunstan<sup>59</sup> and John Cain<sup>60</sup> who manoeuvred and jostled for office. The optimism was

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<sup>54</sup> A. F. Davies, ‘The Government of Victoria’, in S. R. Davis (ed.), *The Government of the Australian States*, Longmans, London, 1960, p. 223.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power & Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria*, James Bennett, Sydney, 1973, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Sir Stanley Seymour Argyle (1867-1940), MLA Toorak 1920-1940; Chief Secretary and Minister of Public Health 1923-24, 1924-27, 1928-29, Premier, Treasurer and Minister of Public Health 1932-35; Leader of Opposition 1930-32, 1935-40.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Tuke Hollway (1907-1971) MLA Ballarat 1932-52, Glen Iris 1952-55; Leader of the Opposition 1940-42, 1950-51; Minister of Education and Labour, Deputy Premier 1943-45, Premier and Treasurer 1947-50, Minister of Lands, Water Supply and Soldier Settlement 1948, Minister of Transport and Electrical Undertakings 1949, Premier, Treasurer, Attorney-General 1952

<sup>58</sup> See for example, *Herald*, 3 January 1947.

<sup>59</sup> Sir Albert Arthur Dunstan (1882-1950), MLA Eaglehawk 1920-27, Korong and Eaglehawk 1927-45, Korong 1945-50; Minister of Lands and Forests 1932-35, Deputy Premier 1932, Premier and Treasurer 1935-43, 1943-45, Solicitor-General 1938-43, Minister of Decentralisation 1943, 1943-45, Minister of Health 1947-48.

misplaced; though younger than the other two, Hollway was every bit of the political manipulator that they were. His machinations and a secretive manner led to distrust on his own side — a dangerous and debilitating situation for a leader.

Hollway, ‘a dealer by instinct’,<sup>61</sup> had long been in contact with Cain over ways of breaking the Country Party’s hold. Even from the time he assumed the leadership he was publicly advocating co-operation with Labor on the issue of redistribution<sup>62</sup> and had argued that it was better to have a ‘vigorous war and post-war policy from Labour [sic] than to have the ‘present inaction’ of the Dunstan Government’.<sup>63</sup> The first discussions with Cain took place as early as the spring of 1941, but nothing was decided on. Hollway reported back to his party and was asked to pursue the subject. The ALP, meanwhile, appointed a committee to examine the issue, even though the shady powerbroker, John Wren,<sup>64</sup> was reportedly hostile to any moves that would displace the Dunstan Government.<sup>65</sup> Hollway’s decision to serve in the RAAF deferred any further action, but when he returned to politics in 1943 he found Cain still interested, ‘getting more impatient’ and contact was resumed.<sup>66</sup> Cain’s frustrations were easy to fathom: the wily

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<sup>60</sup> John Cain (1882-1957), MLA Jika Jika 1917-27, Northcote 1927-57; Assistant Minister of Agriculture 1924, 1927-28, Minister of Railways and Electrical Undertakings 1929-32, Minister of Decentralisation and Reconstruction 1943, Minister of Lands 1953, Premier and Treasurer 1943, 1945-47, 1952-55.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>62</sup> Kate White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> *Australian Statesman*, Vol 11, No 2, February, 1941.

<sup>64</sup> John Wren (1871-1953) was the son of illiterate Irish-Catholic immigrants who set up an illegal gambling empire as well as being involved in the promotion of boxing and racing. He was regarded as having great corrupting influence within the Labor Party and, to a lesser extent, the Country Party when it was in government. Wren was the subject of Frank Hardy’s novel, *Power Without Glory*. His close association with key ALP figures is well documented, as is his association with Dunstan. Apart from his influence in pre-selections and policy, Wren was also reputed to ‘control’ several ALP branches, some of which may even have been fictitious, their membership drawn from Catholic parish lists. Controversy over the extent of Wren’s influence continues. (See White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, *op. cit.*; Frank Bongiorno, *The People’s Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition 1875-1914*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1996; Niall Brennan, *John Wren, Gambler: His Life and Times*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1971; Hugh Buggy, *The Real John Wren*, Widescope, Melbourne, 1977; Chris McConville, ‘John Wren: Machine Boss, Irish Chieftain or Meddling Millionaire?’, *Labour History*, no. 40, May 1981; James Griffin and Geoffrey Browne, ‘Some Light in Shady Places? Thoughts Towards a Biography of John Wren, Entrepreneur and Sportsman’, in Philip Bull, Chris McConville and Noel McLachlan (eds.), *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers Delivered to the Sixth Irish-Australian Conference, July 1990*, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1990. For a succinct overview of Wren’s association with the ALP see Ross McMullin, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>65</sup> White, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.

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Dunstan, at the outbreak of war, had called for political co-operation and minimisation of party differences, and had declared that his government would not proceed with 'legislation on the Notice Paper of a contentious nature'. He then introduced a National Security (Emergency Powers) Bill which regulated public safety, food and power supplies, transport, prices and other matters. Dunstan used such legislation to justify even less government activity, and government and Labor members alike were weary of being fobbed off by Dunstan's administration by prevarication. A break in the alliance occurred in 1942 when Dunstan attacked the Federal Labor government's uniform taxation proposals, a wartime emergency measure which transferred income taxing powers to the Commonwealth, and Cain, under instruction from the ALP executive, withdrew support from the government. While Dunstan then negotiated a temporary alliance with the UAP to remain in office, there had been a significant change because he now had to deal with Cain as Opposition Leader and another supreme pragmatist in Hollway supporting his minority Government.<sup>67</sup> The UAP had smarted in opposition for eight years, and had become a frustrated, faction-riddled, cantankerous organisation, all of which contributed to the new tensions that emerged as Hollway, who loathed Dunstan, insisted as the price of his support that electoral redistribution be placed on the legislative agenda, just as he had discussed with Cain.<sup>68</sup> The trap was set.

Elections in June 1943 saw another inconclusive result<sup>69</sup> with the Country Party holding 19 seats, Labor 15, UAP 12 and five Independents. On September 7, Labor moved a motion of no confidence based on the need for electoral redistribution, and it was carried. Dunstan resigned, and Cain was commissioned to form a government — a move by the Governor that took all players by surprise as Cain and Hollway had counted on Hollway becoming Premier with Labor support. That Government lasted only four days, defeated on the floor of the house, and Dunstan was once again commissioned — this time in coalition with the UAP. Opportunistically, Hollway had struck a bargain with Dunstan, just as he had proposed with Cain, 'and with a shrug to Cain, moved to the deputy

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<sup>67</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>69</sup> Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

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Premier's seat'.<sup>70</sup> Dunstan, as usual, prevaricated despite Hollway's insistence on reform; when he finally agreed to a Bill it was of limited scope that served only to infuriate an already antagonistic Hollway. Parliament ground almost to a standstill so much so that between 1943 and 1945 fewer Bills (174) were introduced into the Assembly than, with the exception of the nine-month parliament of 1920-21, any Parliament since 1902.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the outward lethargy, tensions were rising. Within the Country Party, as Dunstan marked his ten years in office, discontent with his leadership was becoming apparent, and a party room challenge was beaten off in April, 1945. But there was discontent also inside the UAP, soon to become the Liberal Party, as several prominent figures led by the deputy leader, Attorney-General and Health Minister, Ian Macfarlan, threatened to depose Dunstan unless he agreed to an independent tribunal for the public service, and they, too, held talks with Cain.<sup>72</sup> It is an intriguing question as to the involvement of Hollway as this new anti-Dunstan front opened, Hollway himself claiming, somewhat disingenuously, to have no knowledge of it and Macfarlan suggesting he had.<sup>73</sup> Whatever the case, Cain was clearly in on the plot and on September 25, Cain sprung the trap, moving to refuse Supply. When the vote was taken, Macfarlan led four other Liberals across the floor to vote with Labor, and Dunstan was forced to resign. Once again vice-regal fiat upset plans, because as Macfarlan was seen as holding the ace about getting Supply, he was commissioned to form a caretaker government pending elections. Kate White, in her study of John Cain, is adamant that the

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<sup>70</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>72</sup> Edward Barbour, *They Went Their Way*, Journal and Record, Traralgon, 1960, pp. 55-6.

<sup>73</sup> One explanation offered for Hollway's apparent equivocation is his preoccupation with setting up the new Liberal Party, and a decision taken that it was in the interests of the new party to take a less prominent role in removing Dunstan. (See Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 176). This is born out to some extent by Hollway himself, writing in his unpublished memoirs: 'I would have been with Ian [Macfarlan] had it not been for the fact that we had just formed the new Liberal party, and we wanted time to consolidate the new organisation...I told Ian this, but he was not tied up as much as I was with domestic electorate matters, and he pushed on regardless.' (Cited by Kate White, 'Hollway: an atypical Liberal leader?', *Politics*, XIII (2) November, 1978, p. 322.

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move had been planned for some time, and details secret meetings involving Cain, deputy Labor leader, Frank Field, Hollway and Macfarlan.<sup>74</sup>

Dunstan might have been removed, but the price was high for the Liberals, calling into question Hollway's judgement, especially with an election due, because what it did was split the party. Press opinion was uniformly hostile, generally of the view that it was yet another shabby episode in the farce that was Victorian politics, and could serve little useful purpose. The *Age* was scathing in its assessment.

Nobody would regard such an incoming Government with any seriousness; it can be viewed only as the appropriate sequel to the most amazing series of political contortions, back stairs engineering, intrigues and hole-and-corner machinations in Victoria's recent record...The recent manoeuvrings cannot but leave a highly disagreeable impression on the public mind, and handicap the Liberal Party's preparations for the election.<sup>75</sup>

Dunstan had been felled, but not eliminated. The electoral cost was high — the UAP going from 12 seats to the new Liberals' ten and 'Ministerial Liberals' (that is, those who supported Macfarlan) three. Bitter contests raged in the seats held by the Ministerial Liberals as well as in the new branches, some of which supported the Macfarlanites against 'official' Liberals, and it became clear after the poll on 10 November that the ALP was the chief beneficiary, taking its seat tally from 22 to 31. Hollway had played for high stakes and lost, and long-serving, capable men such as Macfarlan, who had held Brighton since 1929, were sacrificed to the ploy that failed. It was political ineptitude on a grand scale.

Hollway had his moment of brief political sunshine in 1947, thanks mainly to the Chifley Government's move to nationalise the private trading banks. The Victorian Parliament resumed at the end of September, with Supply due to run out at the end of the day. The Premier, John Cain, introduced the Appropriation Bill and the resolution to grant Supply was passed by the Legislative Assembly where Labor relied on the support of two Independents and one Independent Labor member. However, when the Bill went to the

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<sup>74</sup> White, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>75</sup> *Age*, 2 October 1945.

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Legislative Council it was rejected. On 8 October 1947, Cain informed the Assembly that a dissolution had been granted, and that an election would be held on 8 November. The Legislative Council then voted Supply.<sup>76</sup>

These were heady times, the excitement fuelled by returned servicemen champing at the political bit, heightened post-war social and economic expectations, and impatience at continuing wartime controls including rationing. If these factors in combination were not potent enough, they were given further impetus by the rhetoric of the day, which was purple in the extreme. It was against this backdrop that the 1947 election campaign in Victoria opened, in some ways a curious quasi-Federal campaign that took the form of a popular referendum on the shape and direction of post-war Australia. With a Federal election not due for another two years, the electorate appeared keen to send a sharp message to Canberra, which it had already done in State by-elections in Western Australia and Victoria.<sup>77</sup>

Soon after polling closed on election day it was clear a savage retribution had been visited on Labor — 14 seats lost, including those of three ministers, while the two Independents were also defeated. The biggest beneficiary was the Liberal Party, gaining 14 seats to give it a total of 27, and the Country Party picking up two for a total of 20. Labor held just 17.<sup>78</sup> The Liberals, who went to the 1945 election badly divided, saw their share of the vote go from 20.51 per cent in 1945 to 37.16 per cent in just two years.<sup>79</sup>

Liberals at both State and Federal level seized on the issue as a means of distinguishing themselves from Labor. And in this Victoria was at the forefront, because until the 1947

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<sup>76</sup> Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel. A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 183.

<sup>77</sup> A long-held Labor seat in the Western Australian Legislative Council fell to the Liberals, and one of the safest Labor seats in Victoria, Collingwood, saw a significant swing away from the ALP, which Menzies said if repeated elsewhere would put Labor out at the next federal election. See May, *op. cit.*, p. 58, *West Australian* 5 September 1947, *Herald* 18 September 1947.

<sup>78</sup> May, *op. cit.*, p. 61, *Age* 10 November 1947.

<sup>79</sup> Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, p. 490.

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rount, Labor held sway in the Commonwealth and in all States bar Victoria and South Australia. Menzies, of course, played a key role in the Victorian campaign, but Hollway used his rhetorical flourishes to good effect by positing the banking legislation not so much as a political abstraction but as an unwanted and uninvited intrusion into the nation's home, threatening each and everyone. The Labor Party was the centralist ogre; the Liberal Party was the defender of the individual's rights.

Banking...is a State matter. It is of such paramount and fundamental importance that it is not only a State matter, but it is a Municipal matter, it is a Church matter, and it is an individual matter, as it must change entirely the course of Australian history.<sup>80</sup>

It was not only an important election campaign for the Liberals in Victoria; it was a major advertising and selling exercise for the Liberal Party as a whole, enabling it to elaborate at considerable length on its central themes, many of which were to reverberate through the 1950s and into the 1960s. It had cleverly identified the powerful latent potential of ex-servicemen, impatient, dissatisfied and, after a few years of action, intolerant of official delay and bureaucratic lassitude. Addressing the issue of soldier settlement, Hollway played to the gallery, noting that 'the backbone of any nation is the man on the land'. He continued:

No more worthy citizens than our own ex-servicemen could be found for this purpose, and the heartbreaking delays that have occurred through two long years of peace have disgusted and disheartened returned soldiers who had intended settling on the land.<sup>81</sup>

Had Victoria at last broken free of the political straitjacket that had confined it for more than a decade? Some believed this to be so with the *Sun*, for example, referring to the 'much more favourable circumstances' enjoyed by the new Government and the hopes carried by Hollway's 'comparatively young, but well-balanced team' in addressing Victoria's pressing problems.<sup>82</sup> Given the history of the previous two years and the

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<sup>80</sup> Hollway policy speech, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Sun*, 21 November 1947. The political stasis in Victoria since Dunstan assumed office in 1935 led to a range of problems that were indeed pressing. A. F. Davies described it as having 'created a politics drained of ideas, and left deep scars on the outlook of the active political groups'. The problems were more

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personalities of Dunstan and Hollway, now yoked uneasily in a composite government, such hopes appear somewhat fanciful and tensions soon became apparent. If there was one particular sticking point that brought the coalition undone in 1948 it was over Hollway's liberal distaste for the Essential Services Act, the Country Party's draconian solution to industrial unrest. Hollway, in his efforts to fight the move, alienated many of his own supporters in the Liberal Party when they later learned later that not only had the head of the Trades Hall Council, Vic Stout, been consulted by Hollway over his break with the Country Party but had actually been present in Hollway's suite at the Windsor when Hollway took the decision. The two had formed more than a working relationship; it was a close friendship,<sup>83</sup> and became a powerful source of distrust of Hollway in his own party.

Just why Hollway became so close to Stout has never been clear. From a strategic point of view such an alliance makes sense if Hollway was seeking to avert any return to the situation in which the ALP would support a minority Country Party Government; at a personal level, which may be closer to the truth, the often poisonous atmosphere not only within the government, but even within the Liberal Party itself stemming largely but not entirely from the split of 1945, Hollway may well have found he could trust Stout (and through him Cain) more than anyone on his own side.<sup>84</sup> If this was the case, and the evidence suggests it was, it was a savage indictment on the state of the Liberal Party after having been conceived so recently with such idealism and expectation.

Inevitably, the composite government experiment ended with Hollway forming a Cabinet entirely of Liberals, and fresh moves to bring about a merger of the two parties again

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than just psychological as neglect permeated the State and Victoria paying dearly in lowered Commonwealth reimbursement grants. (Davies, 'The Government of Victoria', *op. cit.*, pp. 224-5).

<sup>83</sup> Frank McManus, *The Tumult & the Shouting*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977, p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> Stout was not the only 'outsider' in Hollway's circle. Businessman Gordon Snow, editor-in-chief of the *Herald*, John Williams, and Hollway's wife, Sheila, were felt by many Liberals to constitute a 'kitchen cabinet'. Katharine West writes: 'The fact that Hollway was felt to be taking political "outsiders" into his confidence accentuated the tensions that had been growing within the Parliamentary Party since Hollway assumed the Premiership. For the experience of office made him more inclined to present his colleagues at weekly Party meetings with policy and *tactical faits accomplis*'. (West, *op. cit.*, p. 19). West's opinion is supported by a confidante of Hollway's, John Don (personal interview, 26 July 2002).

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failed. The Liberal Party hit back by declaring itself free to contest any electorate; in addition, six Country Party MPs defected to the Liberals who changed their name to the Liberal and Country Party.<sup>85</sup> The events of these years coupled with the experience of government both with and without the Country Party convinced Hollway of the need to address the issue, and he became obsessed with the issue of electoral reform. For a time he was able to carry his party with him, but his party began to trust him less and less; eventually it was to abandon him over the very issue of redistribution.

But for the moment Hollway held sway. After the Country Party had again rebuffed attempts at a merger, the Liberals responded by announcing they would field candidates in every rural electorate in the 1950 State election, and on 1 April, the State Council of the Liberal and Country Party, declared: ‘That under no circumstances will the Council support association of the Liberal and Country Party in a composite Government in the State of Victoria’.<sup>86</sup> After the election in May of that year, in which the Labor Party, somewhat curiously, did not contest eleven country seats, both the Liberals and the Country Party lost ground, and history repeated itself when Labor opted to support a minority Country Party government in return for concessions. It was, commented one newspaper, the most cynical deal ever made in Australian politics – the party least favoured by the voters being wished on to them as a Ministry.<sup>87</sup>

By 1951 it was apparent that Hollway was losing support. He spoke in favour of an unsuccessful motion at the 1951 State Council that sought to rescind the resolution prohibiting composite government, seeking in his speech the freedom to manoeuvre, but a freedom the party was increasingly regarding with suspicion in the hands of Hollway.

I have my own views as to the efficacy of composite governments. The only good thing I can see in this matter is if it leads to final amalgamation of the two parties in the country's political set-up....So I say that rescinding of this resolution would be wise. We should be

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<sup>85</sup> West, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-13.

<sup>86</sup> Katherine West, *Power in the Liberal Party, A Study in Australian Politics*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1950.

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free - that is, the Executive and Parliamentary Party - to deal with circumstances as they arise.<sup>88</sup>

The Liberal Party was now back-peddalling on the issue of electoral reform,<sup>89</sup> and Hollway did not help matters by telling his party one thing and doing another.<sup>90</sup> He had made some powerful enemies along way, notably the self-made businessman and Liberal power-broker, Arthur Warner,<sup>91</sup> who headed the faction which opposed Hollway's redistribution plan.<sup>92</sup> For a whole range of reasons, Hollway was now seen as a liability, as much for his personal style as his policies. His secretive dealings had long rankled

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<sup>88</sup> Fifth State Council Meeting, 8 May 1951, UMA 1/1/2.

<sup>89</sup> There were several factors at work in this reversal. At the level of self-interest, a number of members were concerned about their seats in the event of a major redistribution which two-for-one would necessarily entail. (West, *op. cit.*, p. 21.) Many Liberals were naturally concerned about any alliance with the ALP and considered that an anti-socialist front, that is a broad alliance with the Country Party, was more important than electoral reform. This view is supported by one of Hollway's strongest supporters, John Don, who claimed business supporters of the Liberal Party were becoming increasingly nervous: 'After a while the people who controlled the purse strings of the Liberal Party said no, it's better that we have as a fallback a coalition with the Country Party than to be out, so we must not.' (Interview with author, 26 July 2002). When Hollway was deposed in December 1951, the assistant secretary of the ALP, McManus, said: 'The controllers of big financial interests freely Stated last week they had decided Mr Hollway would have to go.' (Age, 5 December 1951) On yet another level, opposition to two-for-one was a natural tactic for those who had become disillusioned with Hollway, and a key Hollway supporter, Dawnay-Mould, admitted dissension within the party room. (State Liberal and Country Party Council, Minutes, 6-7 September 1950, UMA 2/1/1).

<sup>90</sup> See Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria*, James Bennett, Sydney, 1974, p. 28. Hollway, despite protestations to the contrary, continued to pursue a temporary pact with Labor. He moved a no-confidence motion against McDonald, supported by Labor, but it failed.

<sup>91</sup> Arthur George Warner (1899-1966) MLC 1946-1964, Minister of Housing and Materials 1947-50, Minister of State Development 1948-49, Minister of Electrical Undertakings 1949-50, Minister of Transport 1955-62. The role of Warner has long been debated, and there is little doubt he wielded great influence, and Bolte was something of a protégé – that is, a credible leader with support from the business community. John Don, a Liberal MP at the time, recalls Warner thus: 'Warner was a very aggressive fellow, always wanting his own way. He once boasted to me that he once took on Walt Disney and beat him. He was making a Mickey Mouse wireless set and Disney said he had a copyright on it. So Warner had records searched all over the world and found a Mickey Mouse chocolate bar somewhere so he beat Disney. That's the sort of lengths he went to. He had a philosophy: 'if anyone wanted to challenge him on anything he would take them to the throne of God.' He was only an opponent of Tom [Hollway] in the final analysis: as long as he was getting things from Tom he was onside.' (John Don, interview, 26 July 2002). Warner was, by any account, an unusual politician. Born in 1899 in the depressed East End of London, he trained as a telephone engineer and then began a science course at London University, curtailed by World War I when he joined the Royal Navy. After the war he emigrated to Tasmania where he grew fruit and after taking a correspondence course in accountancy he moved to Melbourne where, as a consulting accountant, he began importing telephone equipment and later radio parts. By these means, and with the help of a partner, he later opened up a small basement store selling radio and later television sets, a business that grew to be Electronic Industries Ltd, the largest electrical manufacturing business in Victoria. (West, *op. cit.*, pp 41-2 fn).

<sup>92</sup> Kate White, *Thomas Tuke Hollway: A Political Biography*, unpublished MA thesis, Latrobe University, 1975, p. 210.

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with the party, and one former adviser has left a vivid portrait of the Hollway *modus operandi* at the time of the widespread strikes when he was Premier.

Conferences were held all over the place. Sometimes there would be as many as 10 of them. Those who attended seemed all to be experts with a word or two to say...The meeting rooms were generally thick with cigarette smoke...Sometimes, however, the conferences were small and select. They usually got somewhere. The most select conference I recall attending consisted of four people. They were Mr Hollway, Sir Gordon Snow, Sir Harry Lawson<sup>93</sup>, and Sir Sidney Snow<sup>94</sup>. The conference had nothing to do with industrial unrest. It was concerned solely with political strategy.<sup>95</sup>

Hollway's relationship with the ubiquitous Gordon Snow was a complex one. A supporter of Hollway's, John Don, had opportunity to observe the relationship at close quarters.

Gordon Snow dominated Hollway. I was his link man for a time when Tom was in London and when something or other happened I contacted Snow and he rang Hollway and Hollway came rushing back by air. Snow was heading a failing business and all he wanted was a knighthood.<sup>96</sup>

Hollway's unorthodox style was costing him support and earning the enmity of powerful men like Arthur Warner; he was also perceived as increasingly erratic, and private doubts were often expressed about his drinking. As Don was to recall: 'I liked him very much, but always thought he was too much under the influence of Gordon Snow. And he drank too much. He always seemed to have a gin and tonic in his hand'.<sup>97</sup> Hollway's weakening grip on his leadership was felt throughout the party. The State President, W. H. Anderson, gave voice to a growing sense of drift, when he addressed State Council in 1951.

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<sup>93</sup> Harry Sutherland Wightman Lawson (1875-1952), MLA Castlemaine 1899-1904, Castlemaine and Maldon 1904-27, Castlemaine and Kyneton 1927-28, Premier 1918-24, Senator 1929-1935.

<sup>94</sup> Sir Sidney Snow, brother of Sir Gordon, was a Sydney businessman prominent in the Liberal Party.

<sup>95</sup> Barbour, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>96</sup> John Don interview, 26 July 2002.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* (White is even blunter, referring to Hollway's 'alcoholism.' – White, 'Thomas Tuke Hollway', *op.cit.*, p. 269).

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Quite frankly I detect in this organisation of ours, a little falling off. We had a very enthusiastic organisation, really red blood, one well-mechanised. But most important was the spirit in it. Let us get over the Federal election and then start to get ourselves right up to the top. ...I believe that this party must examine itself to decide where it stands and what it stands for.<sup>98</sup>

Even within the parliamentary party, trust was minimal, as John Don recalled.

It was a time of deep suspicion and endless intrigue. I hated it. If you were on a committee of some sort you would look around and wonder about whose interests were being represented. It was like that ...There were a lot of leaks from the party room and some were convinced that Alec Dennett<sup>99</sup>, a journalist, had planted sophisticated listening devices in the room!<sup>100</sup>

By late 1951 time and patience had run out for Hollway. The forces opposed to his leadership struck in December, moving a motion that the party room declare the positions of leader and deputy leader vacant. The four Liberals sponsoring the motion – Mibus,<sup>101</sup> Leckie,<sup>102</sup> McDonald<sup>103</sup> and Reid<sup>104</sup> – proposed that a secret ballot be held to fill the positions. Their motion noted ‘the disturbed state of the party and the lowered prestige...’<sup>105</sup> Hollway was determined not to go quietly, refusing to accept the motion; amid uproar he was voted out of the chair which was then assumed by Warner who put the motion and it was ‘carried with cheers’.<sup>106</sup>

Worse was to come for the party, but the fact that the decisive move against Hollway was greeted with such jubilation in the party room is clear evidence of the bitter resentment he had engendered. The four members joining forces to oust him represented both powerful

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<sup>98</sup> Fifth State Council Meeting, 5 May 1951. UMA 2/1/1.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Henry Dennett (1894 -1956), MLA Caulfield 1945-55, Minister of Agriculture and Forests 1947-50, Minister of Labour and Decentralisation 1948, Deputy Premier, Chief Secretary 1952. Dennett had been a journalist before entering parliament.

<sup>100</sup> John Don interview, 26 July 2002.

<sup>101</sup> Johan Wilfred John Mibus (1900-1964), MLA Lowan 1944-45, Borung 1945-1955, Lowan 1955-64; resigned from Country Party 1949 and joined LCP; Minister of Water Supply and Mines 1955-64.

<sup>102</sup> Roland John Leckie (1917-1983) MLA Evelyn 1950-52.

<sup>103</sup> William John Farquar McDonald (1911-1995) MLA Dundas 1947-52, 1955-70. Speaker 1955-67, Minister of Lands, Soldier Settlement and Conservation 1967-70.

<sup>104</sup> George Oswald Reid (1903-1993) MLA Box Hill 1947-52, 1955-73. Minister without Portfolio, Assistant Chief Secretary, Assistant Attorney-General 1955-56, Minister of Labor and Industry and Electrical Undertakings 1956-65, Minister for Fuel and Power 1965-67, Minister of Immigration 1967-70, Attorney-General 1967-73, Chief Secretary 1971.

<sup>105</sup> *Sun*, 4 December 1951.

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and diverse sections of the Liberal Party,<sup>107</sup> furthermore, they were each well-connected, and it is reasonable to assume that their move against Hollway was carefully pre-meditated and the result of some considerable consultation.

That there had been a failure of leadership was beyond doubt. If there had been hopes of improved political fortunes back in 1940 with the passing of the baton from the stolid and unimaginative Argyle, who had been comprehensively outmanoeuvred by the wily Dunstan, to the young and bold Hollway, then they were to be dashed time and time again as the decade wore on. Even the creation of the Liberal Party from the ruins of the old UAP offered little respite from the political malaise that mired Victoria in general and non-Labor in particular. The farcical series of events that split the Liberals in 1945 and delivered votes to the ALP can be sheeted home to Hollway's machinations that forever tainted his leadership. His disinclination to trust his own party as well as his inability to inspire trust presented formidable barriers to any unity of purpose in the party even despite his brief electoral success in 1947, albeit on a Federal issue rather than State issues.

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<sup>106</sup> *Sun*, 5 December 1951.

<sup>107</sup> Mibus, a farmer and grazier from western Victoria, had first been elected as the Country Party member for Lowan at a by-election in 1944, and was among those who defected from the Country Party to the Liberals in 1949. Leckie, a Melbourne barrister and later a judge, was Robert Menzies's brother-in-law. McDonald was a wealthy, old money grazier. Reid, a rare Catholic in the Liberal Party at the time, was a suburban lawyer whose father-in-law had been a prominent general and later Federal MP, Sir James McCay. Alone of the four, only Mibus, a one time candidate for the Lutheran ministry, had not served in the armed forces, and the other three had all been officers. Leckie had served in both the navy and air force, McDonald in the army and Reid had been an RAAF wing commander.

#### 1.4. Failure of Leadership (2): NSW: The Seeds of Liberal Despair

**NON-LABOR** politics in New South Wales was in the doldrums, and despite the formation of the Liberal Party<sup>108</sup> from the remnants of the old United Australia Party and other like-minded groups, internal tensions still ran high; indeed, there was still fallout from the devious machinations<sup>109</sup> that had caused the previous non-Labor government to implode in 1941. Having rid itself of the incubus of Lang,<sup>110</sup> Labor set about re-organising and re-establishing itself as a moderate and capable political party and, after 1941, a moderate and responsible government under a popular leader in William McKell,<sup>111</sup> characterised by ‘more customary institutional arrangements’<sup>112</sup> in contradistinction to the chaos of the Lang era. It has been said of McKell that, in political terms, his main concern was ‘to establish and maintain a stable and responsible style of government. He strove to project an image of unity and competence’.<sup>113</sup>

Labor looked all but unassailable. McKell, in contrast to the divided and dispirited opposition, was demonstrably in control, and spoke a new technocratic language which differentiated him from the class rhetoric of the Lang days. He campaigned on the slogan of ‘not promises but a program’, offering coherent action, a sense of priorities and

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<sup>108</sup> The formation of the Liberal Party in NSW was a far messier affair than it was in Victoria, and organisational problems persisted. From the outset Liberalism in Sydney displayed a different character from that in Melbourne, more akin to the old Free Trade spirit of Reid than to the ameliorist liberal tradition of Deakin. For a detailed discussion of the difficulties in formation see Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent: the Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000, pp. 45-63.

<sup>109</sup> For a detailed account of this see John McCarthy, ‘The Stevens-Bruxner Government 1932-1939’, unpublished MA thesis, University of NSW, 1967.

<sup>110</sup> John Thomas Lang (1876-1975) Labor Premier 1925-27, 1930-32; Ind. MHR Reid 1946-49. Lang was dismissed as Premier in 1932 by the Governor over his plans to repudiate payments to foreign bondholders. Under his leadership the ALP subsequently split into three warring factions.

<sup>111</sup> William John McKell (1891-1985) MLA Redfern 1917-20, Botany 1920-27, Redfern 1927-47, Assistant Minister of Justice 1920, Minister of Justice 1920-22, 1925-27, Assistant Treasurer 1925-27, Minister for Local Government 1930-31, Minister of Justice 1931-32, Premier and Treasurer 1941-47. Later Governor-General 1947-53.

<sup>112</sup> Jim Hagan and Ken Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1891-1991*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 173.

<sup>113</sup> David Clune, ‘The Labor Government in NSW 1941-1965: A Study in Longevity in Government’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1991, p. 28.

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methodical planning.<sup>114</sup> The ALP had little difficulty in winning the 1944 election when it was opposed by a bewildering array of non-Labor parties running under such banners as Democratic, Liberal Democratic and National Liberal in addition to the Country Party; and in 1947, after McKell had been appointed Governor-General and was succeeded as Premier by James McGirr, Labor was again untroubled.

The Liberals were seriously disadvantaged when it came to leadership. The party was not helped by the fact that its first leader, the uninspiring Reginald Weaver,<sup>115</sup> died less than a year after the party's founding; nor was it helped by the decision to reinstate former Premier Alexander Mair<sup>116</sup> as leader. Weaver, a man given to intemperate remarks ('a strident and irascible controversialist'<sup>117</sup>), had been dumped from the Stevens ministry in 1935 and had publicly accused Stevens of turning the parliamentary party of the UAP into a dictatorship; until he succeeded to the speakership in 1937 he was very closely identified with a dissident 'cave' within the government ranks<sup>118</sup> that eventually brought Stevens down. Mair, who succeeded him, had been a compromise candidate in a badly divided party, and his savage defeat in the 1941 elections had not been a surprise. In the short-lived Democratic Party that succeeded the UAP and preceding its merger with the new Liberal Party, Mair had been leader until 1944 when he stepped down, becoming deputy leader, pleading that as he lived at Albury it was impossible for him to devote time to both leadership affairs in Sydney and the needs of his electorate.<sup>119</sup> It sent a mixed signal to the electorate when he was returned to the leadership the following year when Weaver died; and that was further confounded by his apparent reluctance to be there, resigning just five months later to contest, unsuccessfully, a Senate seat at the 1946

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<sup>114</sup> Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>115</sup> Reginald Walter Darcy Weaver (1878-1945) MLA Willoughby 1917-1920, North Shore 1920-256, Neutral Bay 1927-45. Minister for Mines and Forests 1929-30, Minister for Public Works and Health 1932-35, Speaker 1937-41.

<sup>116</sup> Alexander Mair (1889-1969) MLA Albury 1932-46, assistant Minister 1938, Minister for Labour and Industry 1938, Treasurer 1938-39, Minister for Public Works and Local Government 1939, Premier 1939-41. 'One of the least colourful of all New South Wales Premiers' is how he is recorded in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 10, 1986 p. 385

<sup>117</sup> Christopher Cunneen 'The 1944 Election' in Michael Hogan and David Clune (eds.), *The People's Choice: Electoral Politics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century New South Wales*, Vol. 2, 1930-1965, Parliament of New South Wales/University of Sydney, Sydney, 2001, p. 215.

<sup>118</sup> McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

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Federal election. It was clear that the ongoing and serious problems at the top of the party came nowhere near meeting the very considerable expectations that had been created with the formation of the new Liberal Party. Leading figures in the founding of the Liberal Party had significantly heightened expectations, making frequent references to ‘a new and vigorous spirit’ in political life.<sup>120</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* stated in an editorial that what was needed was a clear break with the past and a massive infusion of new talent if the new party was to have any success.

The only hope of the new party is to carry out the promises it has so lavishly proffered at its branch-forming meetings — that it will clean-sweep its slate and bring into the party new men whose record is not tainted by the failure, ineptitude, laziness and unimaginativeness of the past.<sup>121</sup>

The man to whom the party turned looked very much the ideal type. Vernon Treatt<sup>122</sup> had won the Military Medal as a young man serving with the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery in France in World War I, had graduated in Arts and Law from Sydney University, and on returning from Oxford where he had been a Rhodes Scholar, was admitted to the New South Wales bar. A noted swimmer and athlete in his youth he had also played first grade rugby, and within a year of his election to parliament at the age of 41 he had become Minister of Justice.<sup>123</sup> In his eight years at the helm, Treatt led the Liberals to three successive electoral defeats, despite coming within a handful of votes in 1950 — a potential position of strength on which he signally failed to capitalise. For all his qualifications and apparent aptitude, Treatt was simply unable to connect with his colleagues and, by extension, with the wider electorate. John Carrick, who assumed the general-secretaryship of the Liberal Party in New South Wales in 1948, considered his temperament and personality to be quite unsuited to politics.

On paper he was everything you could want: Military Medal winner, World War I, won a bravery medal, was a senior KC, lecturer in law, grazier, a man of probity. He was also

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<sup>119</sup> *Argus*, 10 February 1944.

<sup>120</sup> Eric Spooner quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 1943.

<sup>121</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 28 March 1945.

<sup>122</sup> Vernon Haddon Treatt (1897-1984) MLA Woollahra 1938-62, Minister of Justice 1939-41.

<sup>123</sup> Heather Radi, Peter Spearritt and Elizabeth Hinton, *Biographical Register of the New South Wales Parliament 1901-1970*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, p. 276; Katherine West, *Power in the Liberal Party: A Study in Australian Politics*, F. W. Cheshire Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1975, p. 155.

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one of the most reserved and introverted men I have ever met. He had protected his back against the whole world...He was very difficult. I had a direct phone on my desk in Ash Street linked to his desk in Parliament House and he never used it once. He couldn't project a warmth within his own party.<sup>124</sup>

The tide had begun to turn for the Liberals in the campaign against bank nationalisation in 1947, and there were signs of a Liberal resurgence in New South Wales as the ALP appeared to be losing ground rapidly after the triumph of 1947, losing three by-elections between May 1948 and March 1949, with swings ranging from four to nine per cent.<sup>125</sup> McGirr lacked McKell's sure touch in both electorate and party, and under him the government was 'less capable of decisive action', its stocks falling with the proliferation of grandiose projects begun for political advantage but left unfinished.<sup>126</sup> The press was generally hostile towards McGirr, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in urging a vote for the Liberals, said Labor after nine years in office had 'grown stale, arrogant and disunited'.<sup>127</sup> In addition to the array of unfinished projects, increasing friction over Communist influence in the party and growing industrial unrest further detracted from the lustre achieved by McKell, and Labor was looking decidedly shaky as the 1950 election loomed. Treatt campaigned strongly on these issues and, while the Liberal vote jumped sharply from 29.6 per cent in 1947 to 37.51 per cent in 1950,<sup>128</sup> his leadership was singled out as a key factor in Labor's narrow win; he was seen as 'incapable of galvanising anti-Labor sentiment in the electorate into a crusade'<sup>129</sup> that would bring about a change of government. Carrick, directing his first campaign in New South Wales, noted the leadership issue as a factor.

There was a willingness to trust us...we got almost half the votes. You are seeing the same type of change starting as elsewhere but without the attraction of a Menzies. It was obvious there was a movement, but Treatt was remote from this, from his people.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>125</sup> Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>127</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1950.

<sup>128</sup> Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Governments and Politics 1890-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, pp. 455-6.

<sup>129</sup> David Clune, 'The 1950 Election' in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>130</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

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Treath's relationship with the party organisation was tense and evidently testy. He was in attitude very much of the old school, seeing little role for the party organisation; while the new Liberal Party sought to modernise operations, Treath was a creature of the past, preferring to see elected members as independent entities and free agents, and regarding the party organisation as nothing more than a post office. In a post-mortem on the election result, the party's public relations officer complained bitterly of 'the absence from the Policy Speech of anything to excite the attention of an apathetic electorate', and that all attempts to publicise policy issues in advance had been thwarted by the leader himself.

The consistent rejection by the Opposition Leader of news items and articles submitted by me made it virtually impossible for me to publicise him - [a] regrettable state of affairs. The exceedingly few items of mine ever accepted by him have been recast to become travesties of journalism which I would not issue because their rejection by the newspapers was certain.<sup>131</sup>

Treath, nevertheless, had his diehard supporters, who blamed the party for failing to publicise him adequately. One such supporter was Jack Beale MLA<sup>132</sup> who wrote to Treath referring to the 'statement that is frequently heard since election day is that you could have done better with a more colourful leader'.

By re-electing the Liberal Parliamentary leader, the Liberal Parliamentary Party has confirmed its previously expressed opinion that he has the qualities and qualifications of leadership. It seems that the Party has failed to publicise him adequately...An attempt was made to build up the leader, but it was far too late. A personal pamphlet was distributed in country electorates reaching many electors a few days prior to election day.<sup>133</sup>

A lackadaisical approach to policy issues was also highlighted in a report by a Liberal Party committee set up to examine issues in the 1950 campaign, and Treath's leadership,

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<sup>131</sup> Confidential Report to General Secretary, 1950 State Elections, by R. M. R Warren, Public Relations Officer, Liberal Party (NSW Division) Papers, Mitchell Library, MS 2385/Y 4641/14.

<sup>132</sup> Jack Gordon Beale (1917- ) MLA South Coast 1942-73, Minister for Conservation 1965-71, Minister for Environment Control 1971-73.

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by implication, came in for some solid criticism. The Committee found that ‘the one constant criticism of the State Election campaign’ was that of policy. It was generally agreed by the electorate that the policy was issued ‘too late to be of any effective use, and that it lacked outstanding issues...’. The Committee also ‘discovered considerable criticism concerning the lack of proper functioning of the joint Standing Committee on State Policy’, prior to the State campaign. Investigations revealed that this committee met only once during the year prior to the campaign, and that ‘it did not function at all in the formulation of policy’. The Committee reiterated its ‘belief in the necessity for a constant pronouncement of policy and for the maintenance of an up-to-date party viewpoint on all topical subjects’.<sup>134</sup>

The party, however, was in no mind to replace Treatt and, despite the misgivings, he was returned as leader. However, the influx of a number of new members in 1950, keen-eyed, hard-nosed and predominantly ex-service, was to up the ante; and if Menzies was successful nationally, they saw no reason why this should not be repeated in Australia’s largest State. After all, the Liberal Party was thriving in New South Wales, largely achieving the grassroots ambitions of its founders with some 170 metropolitan branches formed by 1949, 182 country branches and a membership exceeding 36,000.<sup>135</sup> These were the men determined to continue the ‘spirit of ’49’ in which socialism, was vanquished, and a new age inaugurated. That it failed to eventuate in 1950, and at subsequent elections, intensified the disappointment that was to have widespread ramifications throughout the party in the coming years. The new men would make their way, albeit slowly; among their number were two future Liberal Premiers, Robin Askin and Eric Willis.

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<sup>133</sup> ‘Confidential report to the Hon Vernon Treatt MLA, State Parliamentary Leader of the Liberal Party of Australia on some suggestions arising from the 1950 State election’ by Jack Beale MLA, Member for South Coast, 30 June 1950. Liberal Party Papers, Mitchell Library, Y 4641.

<sup>134</sup> ‘Special Committee on Organisation - State Elections 1950, Report to State Council’, Liberal Party Papers, Mitchell Library, Y 4641.

<sup>135</sup> Clune, ‘The 1950 Election’, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

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Electoral defeat at State level contrasted with the Liberals' success at the Federal level, and the ongoing success of Labor, for all its shortcomings, continued to sap self-belief from the briefly optimistic Liberal Party. It had paid scarce attention to leadership, and non-Labor's previous period in government in New South Wales owed more to the unpopularity of Lang than it did to the pragmatic and opportunistic leadership of Bavin, Stevens and the hapless Mair. McKell reformed his party and brought to the Labor leadership a deft common touch that his opponents were unable to match. The parliamentary party's reliance on Treatt, and the dogged determination to retain him as leader, was starkly at odds with the revitalisation of the party both organisationally and as a mass-based party; Treatt was a political throwback. He lacked the communications skills to appeal to the electorate just as he lacked the management skills to inspire and energise his own followers. His subsequent removal, and his succession by two political amateurs in Robson and Morton, (see account in Chapter 4) demonstrated political ineptitude of a high order, especially when contrasted with the political professionalism of Labor's Joe Cahill. The absence of effective leadership further sapped the will to win. Divisions in the parliamentary party remained, often highly visible, and the majority of Liberals maintained outside interests that rendered their political devotion essentially part-time.

## 1.5. 'Dinkum' Leadership and the Post-War *Zeitgeist*

### (a) A Sceptical Electorate

**WHILE THE** failure at the Federal election in 1946 and the ructions in Victoria were disheartening to many Liberals, there were those in office in the new party who used the occasion to exhort members to even greater efforts to convince the electorate that they were truly what they claimed to be. In a summing up of the party's near miss federally in 1946, Anderson suggested that the electorate remained sceptical of the new party.

[A]t the last Federal election we nearly won. We had an excellent policy. It was not the policy that lost the Election, and it was not that the people were not getting dissatisfied with the Labour Party. What lost us the election was that the people were not yet satisfied of the bona fides of the Liberal Party. They were not satisfied that we were dinkum, that we meant what we said, and that we really stood for the people's party representing all sections throughout the country. If they had believed that we would have been in power to-day. You are the only people that can convince them.<sup>136</sup>

A new party it might have been, but the past cast a shadow over the present, especially so as many of the names prominent in the new Liberal Party had been equally prominent in the now widely discredited United Australia Party; the people, it seemed, remained unconvinced. Menzies has recounted how he was reasonably pleased with the modest gains in 1946, but that there were also 'plenty of onlookers' who were exceedingly critical, and that his leadership was once more being brought into question.<sup>137</sup> Leadership, it seems, was very much part of the debate, and resurfaced as an issue early in 1949 when the IPA, lamenting Australia's poor productivity, especially when compared with the Americans, called for a 'new national outlook and faith'. Leadership was found to be lacking 'at the highest order of political and industrial statesmanship', and what was needed were 'leaders who can bring the nation to a new way of life'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> W. H. Anderson, address to Eighth State Council of Victorian Division, 12 August 1947, p. 3. UMA 1/1/2.

<sup>137</sup> Menzies, *Afternoon Light*, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>138</sup> 'Triumph or Disaster?' *IPA Review*, Jan-Feb 1949, Vol 3, No 1, pp. 13-4.

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Sincerity had not been proven, in the words of Anderson; the ordinary Australian had yet to believe these new Liberals were ‘dinkum’. Yet at the same time there was correctly perceived to be a rising tide of anxiety about the directions of post-war Australia, and those who had rallied to the call of the new party displayed a ‘revived enthusiasm’<sup>139</sup> in setting out to defeat socialism. But just how to harness this need to popular sentiment remained problematic. It was a speech a few months after Anderson’s by R. G. Casey<sup>140</sup> that clearly spelled out for the first time just what it was that the Liberals lacked and what they must do. The address, to a Liberal Party Victorian State Council meeting, took the form of a rather blunt *mea culpa*, and spelled out, quite succinctly as it turned out, what the Liberals had to do to build on their creation of a mass party. Electoral success would follow only when that foundation was augmented by mass appeal; in other words, the Liberal Party had to reach out beyond the confines of its own membership if it was to become a real political force; it had to be more engaged in the lives of the ordinary people.

I am one of the many who believe that we Liberals should identify ourselves to the greatest extent possible with the lives of the people. In the past (I am talking of before the war) on our side in politics we tended to live in an ivory tower. We did not have anything like as much contact with the everyday lives of the ordinary average men and women. I am hoping very much that from now on we will increase our efforts to unify ourselves all over Australia with the lives of the ordinary Australian men and women, particularly with those on lower incomes.<sup>141</sup>

Quite pointedly, Casey, then Federal President of the Liberal Party, was delivering a call to action, a call to go out and become one with ‘the ordinary Australian men and women’, a call for the Liberal Party to make itself relevant to the everyday concerns of the people and to connect with them; above all, it was a call to talk to the Australian people in a more colloquial voice, a voice that was unambiguously Australian, a voice that spoke to

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<sup>139</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>140</sup> Richard Gardiner Casey (1890-1976), MHR Corio 1931-40, La Trobe 1949-60; Minister for Works and Housing 1949-50, Minister for National Development 1950-56, Minister for External Affairs 1951-60, Minister in charge of CSIRO 1950-60. Created a life peer as Baron Casey of Berwick. Governor-General of Australia 1965-69.

<sup>141</sup> R G Casey, Federal President of the Liberal Party, address to Ninth State Council of Victorian division, Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne, 3 Dec 1947. UMA, Liberal Party records, 1/1/2.

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*all* Australians, irrespective of creed or economic or social status. It was the message, when heeded and skilfully implemented, that ultimately ushered in the period of Liberal ascendancy in the post-war years — first Federally, later in Victoria, and later still in New South Wales. It cleverly anticipated the emergence of plain men like Henry Bolte in Victoria, David Brand in Western Australia and even later Robin Askin in New South Wales – men of a markedly different stamp from those who, in the public mind at least, had opposed the Labor Party at election time.

Not since the time of Deakin had the non-Labor side produced leaders of high calibre with the ability to reach across the class and economic divides and speak a common language. Federally, non-Labor's time in office had been headed by ex-Labor renegades in Billy Hughes (1917-1923) and Joseph Lyons (1931-1939) and the interregnum of the aristocratic Anglo-Australian, Stanley Melbourne Bruce (1923-1929). Labor, on the other hand, had produced outstanding leaders such as John Curtin (1941-1945) and Ben Chifley (1945-1949), and at the State level, men such as William McKell (1941-1947) and Joe Cahill (1952-1959) in New South Wales (1941-1947), Tom Ryan (1915-1919), Ted Theodore (1919-1925) and William Forgan Smith (1932-1942) in Queensland. Only Tom Playford (1938-1965) in South Australia swam against the tide, and his example would become an unintended forerunner of a different style of leadership.

The new party had been created. Now it was time for a new type of leader.

(b) Leadership and the Liberal Party

‘Leadership can be defined in numerous ways, but probably the simplest definition is that leadership in any unit revolves around the ability of the person in charge to move a group of people, as a team, in the direction of a common goal’. – *US Department of the Army, Pamphlet 600-65, November 1985*.<sup>142</sup>

Leadership is the art of consistently influencing and directing men in tasks in such ways as to obtain their willing obedience, confidence, respect and loyal cooperation in the manner desired by the leader. – *Handbook on Leadership, Australian Army, 1973*.

**POLITICAL** leadership is an elusive concept with a touch of the conundrum about it: we know it when we see it, but we cannot easily define it. There is, as Blondel has written, no generally accepted definition – a characteristic that seems to apply also to leadership in general.<sup>143</sup> As a component of politics it has long been obscured by the ‘politics as power’ approach; indeed, one longtime member of the ‘power school’ has gone so far as to say that the preoccupation with the role of power in politics has served to distract from due consideration of ‘the pivotal role of leadership’.<sup>144</sup> That same theorist went on to describe leadership as ‘one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth’; it was, essentially, a relationship between leaders and those whom they lead. One commentator has put this succinctly: ‘Leadership is a process of human interaction in which some individuals exert, or attempt to exert, a determining influence upon others’.<sup>145</sup>

The words ‘human interaction’ are crucial in this formulation: for here is the antithesis to the rigid school of thought that sees politics played out in a materialist sense — the clashes and conflicts of vast and impersonal forces that operate in a mechanistic rather than a human fashion. It is this ‘human interaction’ that pumps blood into the abstractions and adds flesh to the bones of theory; it is, in essence, the *raison d’etre* of

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted in James D. Pendry, *The Three Meter Zone: Common Sense Leadership for NCOs*, Presidio, Novato, 1999, p. 55.

<sup>143</sup> Jean Blondel, *Political Leadership: Towards a General Analysis*, Sage, London, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>144</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*, Harper & Row, New York, 1978, p. 11.

<sup>145</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *Politics as Leadership*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1981, p. 11.

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political biography.<sup>146</sup> Following on from his sketch of the terrain, Tucker has devised a useful analytical process for considering leadership, dividing its 'directive function' into three phases: first, is the *diagnostic* function in which leaders are expected to define the situation authoritatively for the group; second is the *prescriptive* function that sets out the course of action to meet the situation as defined; and third is the *mobilising* function in which the group's support, or predominant support, is gained for the definition of the situation and the proposed course of action.<sup>147</sup> It will quickly be seen that this dynamic relationship has both a micro and a macro application; the process first operates within the political group before being applied to the wider political community.

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The idea of leadership in the Liberal Party is qualitatively different from the leadership idea in the Labor Party, just as it differs significantly from notions of corporate and military leadership. It is a leadership idea neither encumbered by theory nor bound by precedent; it has considerably more to do with personal skills and personality than it does with ideology, and its efficacy at any given time is essentially of a prescriptive nature: the circumstances do indeed call forth the leader. It has been stated with considerable justification that the 'locus of power in the Liberal Party is the parliamentary leader', owing, largely, to the leader's power to select the front bench and also because of an inherent tendency in the Liberal Party to concede greater weight to party leaders than to

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<sup>146</sup> Gardner has written: 'Leaders cannot be thought of apart from the historic context in which they arise, the setting in which they function (e.g., elective political office), and the system over which they preside (e.g., a particular city or State). They are integral parts of the system, subject to the forces that affect the system' (John W. Gardner, *On Leadership*, The Free Press, New York, 1990, p. 1). Blondel is cautionary about the use of political biography in illuminating leadership, warning that in most cases they are descriptive rather than analytical and that in the main they concentrate their attention on 'exceptional leaders rather than on ordinary or even average ones'. He is also wary of the Lasswell-influenced 'deeper biographies' which aim to provide 'an understanding of the personality'. He writes: 'Moreover, it is not clear that the 'explanations' that are provided by these studies do give answers to questions of motivation, let alone to questions about leaders' effectiveness. The reference to the formation of a personality in adolescence or even early childhood helps to explain why a given leader may have acted in a certain way; but it does not suggest why a given element of the personality contributed significantly to the rise of the leader to power and, once in power, to the impact of the leader'. (Blondel, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-2).

<sup>147</sup> Tucker, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-9.

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notions of party democracy.<sup>148</sup> The party is uniquely dependent upon its parliamentary leadership for its coherence and unity.<sup>149</sup> It has been said that the party ethos is based not so much on participation as on ‘wise and flexible leadership’.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, the party has even been characterised as a ‘leadership party’<sup>151</sup> because of the paramount importance placed on the parliamentary leader.

The position of leader in the Labor Party is highly institutionalised in comparison with the Liberal Party. The fact that Caucus elects front-benchers whereas in most cases with the Liberal Party they are appointed by the leader places the leaders in a very different position *vis-à-vis* their parliamentary colleagues. The nature of the two relationships differs in the primacy of their allegiance: one collectively, the other personally. In the case of Labor, however, the relationship is defined more exactly, with the leader, like all his or her colleagues, subordinated to both conference and platform. The Liberal leader, on the other hand, has (usually) the freedom to define the relationship — both a blessing and a crown of thorns.

Inevitably, as politics is about the pursuit of power, the means if not the goals will often appear different from an organisational standpoint, informed by a different perspective from the purely political and parliamentary; accordingly, there will always be tensions between leaders and parties. In most cases, though by no means all, this will mean in the ALP pressure from the union movement; in the case of the Liberals, it is most likely manifested in criticism from interest groups, especially financial donors, who tend to make their feelings known at organisational level, where the money is raised, rather than at the parliamentary level.<sup>152</sup> The manner in which issues arising from such tensions are

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<sup>148</sup> G. Singleton, D. Aitkin, B. Jinks, J. Warhurst, *Australian Political Institutions*, (7<sup>th</sup> ed.), Longman, Frenchs Forest, 2003, p. 310.

<sup>149</sup> Ken Turner, ‘The Liberal “Iceberg”’, in Henry Mayer & Helen Nelson (eds.) *Australian Politics: A Third Reader*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, p. 369.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>151</sup> David Kemp, ‘The Liberal Party’, in Henry Mayer & Helen Nelson (eds.), *Australian Politics: A Fifth Reader*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980.

<sup>152</sup> See, for example, Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent: The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944-1965*, and his account of the party organisation’s role in delaying and revising the Menzies Government’s proposed Restrictive Trades Practices legislation, pp. 246-8.

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addressed and, if possible, resolved, is a crucial determinant in the leader's authority within the party.

In the case of the Liberal Party, the issue of leadership is problematic on several fronts. At the most basic level the main non-Labor party in the Australian political context traditionally has been something of a reluctant party<sup>153</sup> – a tendency forced into a form of organisation by the emerging Labor Party.<sup>154</sup> Jaensch's distinction between *cadre* and *mass* parties<sup>155</sup> is of significance here because what the new Liberal Party sought to do was to become more mass, and less cadre.

At the level of leadership in the Liberal Party there is always potential for, if not outright ambiguity, then certainly a degree of continuing tension among men and women professing a philosophical belief in individual rather than collective action. A challenge to any Liberal leader is keeping these forces in equilibrium; Hobbesean chaos is never far below the surface, as was in the case in Victoria in the late 1940s and early 1950s when it erupted. Kemp has made the point that the Liberal Party 'generally takes a very instrumental view of the leader'.

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<sup>153</sup> Duverger's general observation about European parties of the Right is broadly applicable to the Liberal Party's predecessors, and its tendencies were to persist to some extent. Duverger wrote: 'The middle-class Right had no need, financial or political, to see the organised support of the masses: it already had its élites, its personages and its financial backers. It considered its own political education to be adequate. For these reasons, until the coming of Fascism, attempts to create mass Conservative parties have generally failed. The instinctive repugnance felt by the middle class party for regimentation and collective action also played some part in the failures, just as the opposite tendency amongst the working class favoured mass organisation in Socialist parties'. (Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State*, Methuen, London, 1959 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 67).

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, P. Loveday, A. W. Martin and Patrick Weller, 'New South Wales', in P. Loveday, A. W. Martin, R. S. Parker (eds.) *The Emergence of the Australian Party System*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1977, p. 241.

<sup>155</sup> Dean Jaensch, *The Liberals*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, pp. 6-7. Jaensch makes the point that the early Liberal Party of 1910 was firmly within the cadre mold as the antithesis of Labor's expressive, democratic centralism. The notion of the cadre party, with its emphasis on Burkean independence for elected members, lingered on in the Liberal Party even after 1944 and became an entrenched resistance to efforts to modernise and professionalise the party apparatus. Its lingering presence was the source of instability, and even leaders such as Hollway in Victoria and Treatt, Robson and Morton in New South Wales were adherents to its eccentricities.

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(H)e is elected by the party room to do a job – to ensure effective government and electoral victory. If he falters he may be dismissed and replaced by one of the contenders waiting in the wings for the moment of opportunity.<sup>156</sup>

It is chiefly for these reasons that the issue of leadership is fraught with difficulties in a way that it is not within the ALP, whose elected MPs are, in effect, delegates. Effective leadership in the Liberal Party essentially delivers three things: a sense of movement measured in electoral success, a sense of purpose and a sense of unity. In the first attempt to define some of the characteristics of Liberal leadership, Kemp, writing in the wake of the coalition's defeat in 1972, dismissed those who saw leadership in terms of 'image' as quite missing the point.

The leader's first task is – as the very word implies – to *lead* the party he heads. *The first and most important relationship is between leader and followers, not between leader and the public.* The experience of the last few years underlines the crucial point that the man who cannot unify and lead his colleagues in parliament cannot make a successful appeal to the electorate. Electoral success – as Mr Whitlam now confirms – follows successful management of relations within one's own party first of all. [Emphasis in original]<sup>157</sup>

Kemp contrasted the disarray of the Liberals in 1972 with the electorally successful parties led by Menzies and Bolte, noting that these two leaders, sometimes depicted as 'ruthless', acted from having the authority of the party behind them which enabled both to 'be confident that when he acts firmly his actions will not stimulate the formation of factions, cabals and mutiny'. While Kemp acknowledges the role of personal qualities, he writes that the leader 'must be able to show that there is a common bond between himself and his colleagues, and his colleagues must feel a sense of solidarity with each other'.<sup>158</sup>

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Successful leaders at the Federal level have shown distinctly different styles in comparison with State Liberal leaders, perhaps reflecting to some extent the very

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<sup>156</sup> Kemp, 'The Liberal Party', *op. cit.*, p. 300.

<sup>157</sup> David Kemp, 'A Leader and a Philosophy', in Henry Mayer (ed.), *Labor to Power: Australia's 1972 Election*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, p. 50.

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different nature of the jurisdictions. State Premiers who have moved into the Commonwealth parliament have not been notable leaders at that level, and only two Prime Ministers, Reid and Lyons, have been former State Premiers — a fact that is heavily qualified by Reid's having served before Federation and Lyons in the unusual circumstances of having defected from the Labor Party to head a new non-Labor grouping.<sup>159</sup>

Despite more than a century of federation, Australians still tend to identify strongly with their home State,<sup>160</sup> and State governments, in several senses, are closer to home; and political leaders at this level become identified with daily life in a way that is both intricate and intimate. Such a relationship with the electorate is seldom easy, nor is it one that sits comfortably on all aspiring shoulders. Robert Menzies, a rising star in Victorian politics, could not contain his enthusiasms for a perceived higher calling; nor is it easy to imagine such reserved characters as Stanley Melbourne Bruce (1923-29) or Malcolm Fraser (1975-83) happily entertaining delegations pressing issues of local government, sewerage works and liquor licensing.

*Playford*

The Premier of a small State has a constant problem: to raise revenue from a narrow tax base in order to deliver even basic services. Such demands call for political skills of a high order that are often largely unrecognised, but Thomas Playford possessed them in abundance, as his record term as Premier (1938-1965) partly suggests. But Playford was

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<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>159</sup> George Reid was Premier (then styled Prime Minister) of New South Wales 1894-99 and served as Prime Minister of Australia 1904-05). Joseph Lyons was Premier of Tasmania 1923-29, served as a Minister in the Scullin Labor Government and joined the Nationalists in forming the new United Australia Party, serving as Prime Minister 1932-39.

<sup>160</sup> John Rorke, Introduction to Rorke (ed.) *Politics at State Level – Australia*, Dept of Adult Education, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1970, n.p. This was perhaps more so the case then than now.

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more than just an artful political manipulator; he was a leader *par excellence*. His subtle but determinedly applied skills were brought to bear with considerable success on his party, his electorate, the Commonwealth and even the Labor Opposition in South Australia.<sup>161</sup>

Despite being the grandson of a former Premier and later a Senator, Playford's early life was inauspicious; he left school early and worked on the family cherry orchard. By the time he was thirteen he was driving a horse-drawn trolley down to the fruit markets in Adelaide from the orchard in the surrounding hills; it was, as he was later to recall, an essential part of his education in getting the best price possible for his fruit and in dealing with men.<sup>162</sup> When World War I broke out Playford was eighteen, and nine months later he joined the army as a volunteer, sailing a fortnight later with the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion which, after a short spell in Egypt, took part in the fateful landing at Gallipoli. After the evacuation, it was briefly back to Egypt and then on to France and Flanders, and for two and a half years the men of the 27<sup>th</sup> endured frightful warfare — Flairbaix, Messines, Pozières, Ypres and Flers. Casualties were heavy. Playford himself in November 1916 was shot through the chest with shrapnel, wounded so severely that he was almost given up for dead. He was evacuated to England, spending almost a year in hospital and despite several operations all of the shrapnel was never extracted, and his hearing was impaired. He insisted on returning to his battalion despite the offer of a staff job in India and saw further action and blood-letting at Passchendaele, Morlancourt and Villiers-Bretonneux. He had enlisted as a private, and was promoted to sergeant; near the war's end he was commissioned. Like all men who fought in the war, the experience had a profound effect on him, in particular impressing upon him the relativities about human beings and what a mixed-up lot men are. He never ceased to believe in the maxim: 'There is so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it doesn't behove any of us to talk about the rest of us'.<sup>163</sup> In other words, he took people as they

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<sup>161</sup> Walter Crocker, *Sir Thomas Playford: A Portrait*, Melbourne University Press, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 21-3.

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were. Many years later, he offered the above quotation to a biographer when asked about his early influences.

I think going to the war influenced me greatly...The war gave you a knowledge of people and a knowledge of the world of human beings. You saw human beings under circumstances that you didn't see them normally.<sup>164</sup>

After the war it was back to the orchard, marriage and family life, and in 1933 an old army friend encouraged him to enter politics, which he did at a time when South Australia was slowly emerging from the Great Depression. After five years on the backbench, Playford was elevated to Cabinet in the relatively junior portfolios of Repatriation, Irrigation and Lands; five months later when the Premier, Butler, resigned to contest a Federal seat, Playford was Premier. The choice fell on him, as he always maintained, because 'no one seemed to be particularly anxious to take the job on'. Political leadership at that time offered a bleak prospect: independents dominated the House of Assembly (15), the same number as the Liberals, and Labor had 9. The economy was stagnant, unemployment was the highest in the country, and South Australia was, in Playford's words, 'hopelessly insolvent'. In fact, the situation was so bad that at one stage the Government had to resort to borrowing money from a private citizen to meet its commitments.<sup>165</sup> The outgoing Premier's advice to his successor did nothing to raise hopes: 'Don't forget that every day a government lives it drives another nail into its coffin. So don't be perturbed if you don't last long'.<sup>166</sup>

Playford did not obtain a majority until 1941, but he remained conscious of how the State had suffered from the depression, and he sought as far as possible the co-operation of the Opposition and, where possible, addressing its concerns. He was to tell a biographer that he made a point of inserting 'kindly references' to the Leader of the Opposition<sup>167</sup> in his

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<sup>164</sup> David Nicholas, *The Pacemaker: The Playford Story*, Brolga, Medindie, 1969, pp. 32-3.

<sup>165</sup> Oral History Interview with Sir Thomas Playford by Mel Pratt, National Library of Australia, 2-4 February 1972. TRC 121/29, p. 5.

<sup>166</sup> Crocker, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>167</sup> Playford made a point of cultivating good personal relations with the Opposition. There is a delightful story that illustrates this and Playford's innate decency. In 1953 he and the then Opposition Leader, Mick O'Halloran and their wives, set sail for England and the Coronation, leaving the ship at Genoa to travel overland to London. In Rome they were to see the Pope and for O'Halloran, a Catholic, this was a special

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policy speeches on the grounds that 'it is hard for a man to be antagonistic if he feels he is getting a fair go'.<sup>168</sup> As to his relations with Cabinet, Playford left no doubt who was in charge. Whenever a Minister was absent, Playford made a point of acting for them, not only enabling him to use his grasp of detail but also giving him an unusually detailed overview of the government as a whole and also understanding the work of each Minister.<sup>169</sup> The majority of his ministers, though competent, 'tended to be routine men'; but while Playford was dominant in Cabinet, he insisted that all decisions be unanimous.<sup>170</sup> On the one occasion he had to remove a Minister who refused to resign, Playford quietly resigned himself, his Cabinet therefore ceasing to exist. The Governor, after the due formalities, then commissioned him to form a new government, which he did minus the offending former Minister.<sup>171</sup>

The undemonstrative yet determined leadership of Playford was also evident in his handling of both the public service and his own party. South Australia, for all its ills, was especially fortunate in having some exceptionally talented public servants, notably the former ALP Member of Parliament, L. C. Hunkin, the Oxford-educated Sir Edgar Bean and Sir Fred Drew, all of whom Playford encouraged and inspired. Drew, the Under-Treasurer, described Playford as 'the most intelligent, capable, persistent and patient Minister I ever encountered' while Hunkin said he treated his officials as comrades, never either bludgeoning or humiliating them.<sup>172</sup> In his relations with the Liberal and Country League, Playford was both correct and remote; he did his part by governing and retaining

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moment. He had sought the audience before leaving Australia only to be told by the Holy See that the Pope did not see Leaders of the Opposition in private – only heads of State. Bitterly disappointed he relayed the news to Playford. 'Mick', said the Premier, 'if I asked for an audience why don't you see if I could take you with me?' They went together as a 'South Australian Government delegation'. (See Stewart Cockburn, *Playford: Benevolent Despot*, Axiom, Adelaide, 1991, p. 218.)

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63. Katharine West has commented on Playford's shrewdness in this regard noting that 'his preferences for recognising his opponents by incorporating certain of their views in his legislation put Labor in the incongruous and seemingly insincere position of having alternately to accept and reject the Government's basic proposals'. (Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party: A Study in Australian Politics*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965, p. 60).

<sup>169</sup> Crocker, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.* pp. 66-7; See also Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics, 1890-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, p. 209.

<sup>172</sup> Crocker, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

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office; he went to some lengths to dispel the notion that he was in any way close to the 'small, wealthy, powerful group' of members. Playford made much of his independence; for example, he continued to ignore with impunity year after year calls at party conventions after the war to end rent and price controls in the State.<sup>173</sup> His ascendancy over the party organisation was helped by his accretion of personal power outside the party; and this was considerable, especially given his identification in the public mind with the rapid industrialisation under his rule.<sup>174</sup> Playford was conspicuously not a member of the Adelaide Club,<sup>175</sup> the venerable bastion of the South Australian Establishment.

There was never any doubt in any of these spheres as to who was the leader. Sir Walter Crocker summed it up succinctly.

The point about Playford and power, in short, is not that he was unaffected by power but was so little affected...Playford had that mixture, common and necessary in the true leader and in the true ruler, of distance: self-sufficiency, lack of real intimacy, even with colleagues, real intimacy only with his family group. Outside of it, if indeed always inside it, he told no one everything and he told very few very much. He lived alone. He knew this was the price that had to be paid for power and authority.<sup>176</sup>

*Brand*

David Brand, a quiet and unassuming farmer turned mineworker turned storekeeper, came to the Liberal leadership at a time of considerable stress and tension in 1957 when the party was locked in bitter conflict with the Country Party. Ironically, it was Brand's firmness which changed the course of events. Before, the parliamentary party and the party organisation were at loggerheads over relations with the Country Party, with the Liberal leader, Ross McLarty, disinclined to push the issue as the organisation wanted,

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<sup>173</sup> Cockburn, *op. cit.*, p., 215; West, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>174</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>175</sup> This clearly amused Playford. He would very occasionally accept an invitation to lunch or dinner at the club and on one occasion, long after he had retired, two other members were passing his table and one stopped to ask in surprise: 'Whatever are you doing here, Tom?' Playford replied with gentle irony: 'I've come to see how my former masters conduct themselves'. (Cockburn, *op. cit.*, p. 215).

<sup>176</sup> Crocker, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

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pleading protection of the Federal coalition.<sup>177</sup> Brand, however, supported a merger; his diplomatic skills under the circumstances managing at the same time to effect a working relationship with the Country Party that resulted in a coalition after the 1959 election. He gradually asserted his ascendancy in managing the relationship with the junior coalition partner, even to the extent of being in a position to curb the excesses of an aggressive State president. The result was a far more effective relationship than had existed in previous Liberal-led governments.<sup>178</sup> He had shown, West wrote, ‘firm but sympathetic leadership in the [Liberal] party room’.<sup>179</sup> Brand, however, had been by no means an inevitable choice as McLarty’s successor, being seen by some of his colleagues as having neither the intelligence nor the drive of his main rival, Charles Court, who had entered parliament less than four years earlier. Brand was helped by his representing a rural rather than a metropolitan seat, his farming occupation and his ‘retiring and modest manner’, especially in regard to the brash newcomer, Court, a city accountant.<sup>180</sup> It was, in the eyes of many Liberals, essential to have as a leader a figure who would present ‘a sufficiently rural image’.<sup>181</sup> With the able Court as his deputy, Brand was able to resist party pressures regarding rural issues which had dogged the former leader, McLarty. It gave him an ascendancy in the party that his predecessor never had, owing much to the rapid expansion of secondary industry; it was this, in the end, according to West, that the once-powerful pastoralists ‘finally abandoned their last-ditch battle to preserve political dominance within the governing coalitions of the Right’.<sup>182</sup>

Brand’s background was modest. Coming from a family of pioneer farmers in the Geraldton area, he grew up on the family farm, left school after seventh grade, and remained on the family farm until he was 23. He left only because there was not enough to sustain the family, taking in turn jobs as a treatment hand, filter specialist and later shift boss in the Kalgoorlie mines. When war broke out, he enlisted as a private in the

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<sup>177</sup> West, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-1.

<sup>178</sup> David Black, ‘The Liberal Party and its Predecessors’, in Ralph Pervan and Campbell Sharman (eds.) *Essays on Western Australian Politics*, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, 1973, p. 223.

<sup>179</sup> West, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-4.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.

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2/11 Battalion of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, embarking for Egypt in April 1940. He saw active service in North Africa, taking part in the first advance through Libya, Bardia, Tobruk, Dernia and Benghazi; he was promoted corporal. Later serving in Greece he was wounded in April 1941, evacuated to Alexandria and after, after 12 months in hospital, returned to Australia where he was invalided out of the army in 1942. He then joined the Volunteer Defence Corps as a chief instructor and, when the war ended, took over the general store at Dongara, 70 km south of Geraldton, where he was born, and joining the new Liberal Party. He stood for the seat of Greenough at a by-election in October 1945 where he was successful, becoming in the process the first member of the new Liberal Party elected to Parliament anywhere in Australia. Within two years he became party Whip, then an honorary Minister and joining the Cabinet as Minister for Works, Water Supply and Housing in 1950.<sup>183</sup> His keen eye for development opportunities (later so closely identified with his livewire Minister for Industrial Development, Charles Court) was apparent early in his ministerial career, most notably in his close working with the director of works, Sir Russell Dumas, to secure the 1952 agreement with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company for the establishment of a refinery at Kwinana; in later life he would describe this as his greatest achievement.<sup>184</sup> When he became Premier in 1959, he was to hold office for a record 12 years, ushering in under his leadership unprecedented industrial and mineral resource development in Western Australia. Brand was seen not only as a healer and negotiator, which he was, but also as presenting ‘an image of honesty and sympathy with all levels of society...’<sup>185</sup> For his own part, Brand saw his experience among people as the chief determinant in his political career.

I think that if I was asked what assisted me most I should say that, along with having been in the Army and seeing the other side of things and meeting so many people associated in all walks of life, that I realised what a Member of Parliament could do if he only had the opportunity.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> G.S.Reid & M.R.Oliver, *The Premiers of Western Australia 1890-1982*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1982, p. 90.

<sup>184</sup> See David Black, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 13, 1998, p. 250.

<sup>185</sup> Black, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>186</sup> Oral History Interview with Sir David Brand by Joan Ambrose, National Library of Australia, TRC 548, 3:1/31.

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As leader, Brand presided over the smoothest coalition arrangement in the State's history, despite some friction at the Federal level;<sup>187</sup> his own party remained united and the former intrusions of the organisation were effectively nullified. As a public figure Brand was seen very much as 'a man of the people',<sup>188</sup> and enjoyed considerable public respect, even affection. He was characteristically modest about his own political approach.

Well, there's no question common sense prevails just as it should in most things, all things. And certainly in government, with those little finicky questions that are put to you from time to time, you ask yourself: 'well, what's the sensible thing to do?' And always associated with that answer is just common sense.<sup>189</sup>

On his death in 1979, he was remembered with deep affection. The *West Australian* in an editorial described him as 'an ideal leader of men' whose leadership was characterised by 'a winning nature and an ability to inspire others'.<sup>190</sup>

#### *Bolte and Askin*

No two leaders more clearly exemplify what became the post-war paradigm of successful Liberal leadership at State level than do Henry Bolte of Victoria and Robin (later Robert) Askin of New South Wales. There are many striking similarities between the two, but perhaps none more so than their apparent unorthodoxy; neither was by any means a member of the Establishment. In fact, there were serious reservations entertained about the qualities of both men, and there was, at least for a time early in their respective careers, a degree of publicly expressed speculation about their leadership longevity.<sup>191</sup> Each came from a relatively modest background: Bolte was a struggling farmer, Askin a bank worker who had lifted himself above a blue-collar upbringing. Both men were married but childless; each had enlisted in the army and served conspicuously as non-

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<sup>187</sup> West, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-6; Black, *ADB, op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>188</sup> Black, *ADB, op. cit.* p. 250

<sup>189</sup> Brand interview, 2:2/4.

<sup>190</sup> *West Australian*, 16 April 1979.

<sup>191</sup> See *Courier-Mail*, 10 September 1981; *Australian*, 10 September 1981; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January 1990.

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commissioned officers rather than officers. They were, in their time, identifiably average in their way of life; they attended sporting events, bet on the races, drank in public bars. They related to the common man and woman because this was the milieu from which they came and which, in an important sense, they never really left. They spoke a language that was the language of the people: clear, direct and earthy. Neither man was given to abstract speculation or public equivocation; each lauded common sense as a dominant virtue. Their appeal to voters who might have once voted Labor from habit was immense. The old class warfare rhetoric about silvertails and those born to rule was simply risible if applied to Bolte or Askin; their very ordinariness was itself a most eloquent and powerful statement about the Australian egalitarian ideal. Their life experiences — they were both deeply involved in the community and active in sporting circles — gave them a feeling for and an insight into human behaviour; in each case this was furthered by their experiences in the military, significantly not by exercising the ‘sneer of cold command’ or the simple pulling of rank as an inexperienced officer might be inclined to do.<sup>192</sup> Importantly, the primary function of an NCO is to be a frontline leader.<sup>193</sup> Implicit in the qualities demanded was trust; a good officer or NCO had to demonstrate that he was *dinkum*. This meant that they had to lead by example, and effectively demonstrate their worthiness; in the AIF officers and NCOs, especially the sergeants, saw to it that their men ate before they did.<sup>194</sup> The role of an NCO is to maintain order, ensure discipline and cajole and encourage rather than command; it is a sometimes curious situation of being at once with the men and yet, subtly, apart.<sup>195</sup> It is a role that is essentially fashioned by personal qualities rather than rank; it was the way, also, that each approached political leadership.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> A useful distinction here is Etzioni’s typology which separates leaders whose power is derived from their formal position and those whose power emanates from their personal characteristics. (Amitai Etzioni, *Complex Organizations*, The Free Press, New York, 1961, p. 203.)

<sup>193</sup> James D. Pendry, *The Three Meter Zone: Common Sense Leadership for NCOs*, Presidio, Novato, 1999, p. 165.

<sup>194</sup> John Laffin, *A Kind Of Immortality: An Autobiography*, Volume 1, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 135.

<sup>195</sup> The Australian Army’s *Handbook on Leadership* (8-3) puts it thus: “They have the difficult task of leading the men under their command while also living with them both in the field and in barracks.”

<sup>196</sup> The key to both Askin and Bolte in terms of leadership was the team, approach the fashioned and the cohesiveness of those teams. This what an NCO is expected to achieve. The US Army’s main NCO manual states: ‘Train your soldiers as a team. All of the Army’s successes depend on team cohesiveness.’

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Each came to the leadership at a time of turmoil in their respective parties. In Victoria, the party had been rocked by a serious split and a rapid succession of leaders; divided against themselves the Liberals were decisively rejected at the 1952 election. Bolte, fortuitously *in situ* as deputy leader owing more to his representing a rural electorate than anything else, became leader largely by accident. He worked closely with the party organisation to heal the divisions, won the respect of his followers and was quickly the unchallenged leader. Askin's route to the top was more characterised by ambition and cunning than anything else, yet the party he inherited was both dispirited and divided, and had also been wracked by leadership instability. He was always the leader in waiting, and when in 1954 he challenged for the leadership after just four years in parliament and found himself unable to break a deadlock with his arch-rival Morton, he demonstrated great political acuity in having his former commanding officer, Robson, elected as a compromise candidate while he acceded to the deputy's position. Knowing Robson as he did, he must have been aware that the move was essentially a holding operation; yet he had used it effectively both to break a deadlock and to keep his own chances alive for another day. In his *modus operandi*, he never lost sight of his goal. Like an efficient NCO going among the men, he had a quick word here, a beer or two there and perhaps a game of billiards; all the time he quietly gathered his numbers. Once in the top job, he secured it just as surely as he had gained it; he won the trust of his men and their loyalty and was never challenged. The New South Wales Liberals, riven by factionalism, had become a laughing stock up until the time of Askin's accession to the leadership in 1959, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a biting editorial, asked 'who would want to lead the Liberal rabble?' The editorial questioned whether the Liberals even deserved a good leader 'if their first instinct is to form cabals against him and challenge his position every few months'.<sup>197</sup> Askin quickly put a stop to this, as one observer noted: 'Discipline within

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Cohesion demands strong bonds of mutual respect, trust, confidence and understanding among soldiers in your unit. Cohesion and discipline go hand-in-hand'. (Dan Cragg & Dennis D. Perez, *The NCO Guide*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, 1989, p. 31.) These were very much the qualities that both political leaders brought to their hitherto fractured and divided parties, and both led parties and governments characterised by their cohesion and stability.

<sup>197</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1959.

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the ranks of the parliamentary party has undoubtedly improved under a leader who has been firmer than his predecessor and less familiar with his colleagues'.<sup>198</sup>

Bolte had lived through the Liberals' age of nightmare and had seen at close quarters just how damaging a faction-ridden party could be. Once he became leader he worked to ensure that he remained leader. One example of this was his insistence that backbench members not have rooms to themselves; he expressed the view that he liked to know where they were, otherwise they were likely to be 'off plotting'.<sup>199</sup> Bolte was, clearly, the undisputed leader; his support stemmed not just from his position at the apex of the party hierarchy but from the personal qualities — the 'very force of his decision-making', as one backbench MP put it.

I think that this is a very necessary factor of a leader, that he must be able to make up his mind, get the concurrence of his supporters, and then carry it out. This is in fact what Henry Bolte did.<sup>200</sup>

Bolte himself was adamant that leadership, as well as loyalty, emanated from the top. Part of his approach in ensuring loyalty in return was to demonstrate it; another part was to foster close personal relations, seeing his supporters as individuals in their own right.

Unless the leader is loyal to his team, whether it be in Cabinet or the Party room, he'll never receive loyalty in exchange. And that was one thing I tried to do; I hope I succeeded. And it's rather amusing to think that you've not only got to be a politician, you've got to be almost a marriage guidance counsellor, an expert in bankruptcy, in every problem that could meet or be met by, say, sixty or seventy fellows. You've got them from all walks of life, there's all sorts of problems, there's all sorts of troubles, and if you're the leader they come to you on all of them.<sup>201</sup>

Askin, too, kept in close touch with his members. His successor, Tom Lewis, who had served in all Askin's Cabinets, noted how 'he made time to see and talk to everyone'.<sup>202</sup> Askin, while clearly in command, admitted that his personal style, in terms of direction, was 'very loose'. He adhered to the view that if he appointed a man to be a Minister he

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<sup>198</sup> Katharine Holgate (West), 'The Structure of Liberal State Politics in NSW', unpublished MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1962, p. 72.

<sup>199</sup> Ian McLaren Oral History Interview, National Library of Australia. Interview by Mark Cranfield April 1986 and February 1987, TRC 1969. Transcript page 175.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>201</sup> Oral History Interview with Henry Bolte by Mel Pratt, 11 February 1976, National Library of Australia, TRC 121/73, 1:2/27.

<sup>202</sup> Interview with Tom Lewis, 2 August 2002.

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left it to him to do the job.<sup>203</sup> To Askin, being an effective leader in the political field was about being an ‘average Australian’.

Being good outside means being able to go to the football match, to the cricket match, have a glass of beer, go to the race meeting, and use a few Australian expletives and just be the average Australian. In my experience the voter looks for someone who is of the same ilk as himself, but perhaps a little, just a little, higher up the scale, he likes to think, but not too far up.<sup>204</sup>

The leadership cases of both Bolte and Askin exhibit strong parallels with the typical good NCO in applying themselves to past weaknesses of organisation, approach and commitment. It enabled them to be good leaders as well as healers and motivators. This is precisely what the US Army seeks to instill into its NCOs.

Successful leaders learn from their experiences. They use their knowledge of past weaknesses to strengthen themselves, their soldiers and their units. From experience they develop priorities and direction.<sup>205</sup>

In other words, they lead rather than just command. This is what Bolte and Askin did, and this why they had followers and were never challenged.

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<sup>203</sup> Oral History Interview with Robert Askin by Mel Pratt, 7 and 11 October 1976, National Library of Australia, TRC 121/83, 2:2/28.

<sup>204</sup> *ibid.*, 2:2/27.

<sup>205</sup> Cragg & Perez, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

## 2. LEADERSHIP AND THE LIBERAL ASCENDANCY: THE NEW RHETORIC OF PROSPERITY

2.1 The Background

2.2 The Liberals' King Tide

2.3 Emancipation of the Catholic Vote

2.4 Liberal Resurgence in the West

2.5 South Australia and the Playford Era

2.6 A Liberal Australia

*Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers.* – Old Arab Proverb

## 2.1. The Background

**THE MINDSET** of the men who entered Parliament after the war was of a qualitatively different stripe than before, especially on the Liberal side. It was, as prominent Liberal and former prisoner-of-war, John Carrick, described it, a heady mixture of idealism and pragmatism infused with a certain impatience.

Into the parliament came people who said: 'I grew up in the Depression, class is ugly, bigotry is ugly, I want a new world. People are people as far as I am concerned.' So you had really almost a sea change. You had the evolution of those at home wanting to get rid of socialism, and wanting to get rid of war. This new group coming through wanted to put aside prejudice and class.<sup>1</sup>

If the class and religious divide that had prevailed for most of the time of European settlement of Australia was diminishing, there remained, however, a divide that was perpetuated by a combination of political tradition and a lack of exposure to the social leavening experienced by many who had gone to the war. These were, in the main, men whose reserved occupations had kept them at home; a great proportion of them were trade unionists, and from their number was drawn the cadre of union officials that formed the industrial wing of Labor. Their thinking and influence within the ALP was paramount in the immediate post-war era. To Carrick this meant there were 'two very different kinds of people' going into parliament in the two immediate post-war elections of 1946 and 1949: the Labor members, by and large, retained a rigid mindset whereas on the non-Labor side 'we didn't have the same trade unionism and reserved occupations, and we had a large number of men with recent wartime experience'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

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The gulf separating men who had served in the armed forces and those who had not was for decades one of the great unspoken divides in Australia. The Liberal Party, at both Federal and State level, contained a significantly greater number of MPs who had been in the services than did the ALP (See Tables 1 & 2 below). Not only did they have the ‘leavening’ experience as described by Carrick, they also had first-hand experience of the adjustment process from wartime to peacetime, and in many cases, saw for themselves the gap between expectation and reality. It enabled them to speak with an authenticity that resonated with community concerns — concerns they, in many instances, would share.

The developments that were apparent by the mid-1950s represented not so much a sudden shift in the political wind as the culmination of a series of social changes that originated in the years after World War I. Many of those active in the Liberal Party were of a background similar to Carrick’s: born towards the end of the war, growing up in the Great Depression and then being thrust into another war; it was, in his view, a powerful experience of social leavening.

The war, in a most extraordinary way, mixed people up. Hundreds of thousands of Australians were spread around the world living together. The socialising effect of war hasn’t been fully understood at all. People have to learn, first of all, to live with each other 24 hours a day. What you learn is that most people have problems of self-confidence and insecurities, and that most people are, in fact, better than they think they are. You are separated away from your families and are inevitably forced to talk in some idealistic way about your families. You intermingle with each other, Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and you make a judgement not on what religion he is but on what sort of a fellow he is. The cleansing process, if you can call it that, covered our remoteness – our remoteness of religion, and remoteness of economic class. It took people into a wider world. It gave them a wider view; took them away from their narrow little suburb. It was a tremendous cathartic situation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

**Table 1. War service among Members of Federal Parliament 1951-1956**

<i>Number/ Party</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>WW II</i>	<i>WWI &amp; II</i>	<i>WW I</i>	<i>Boer</i>
101(a) Liberal	72 (59.5%)	60 (59.5%)	9	19	0
27(b) CP	19 (70.3%)	14 (51.8%)	7	12	0
100 (c) ALP	26 (26%)	14 (14%)	0	9	3

(a) 3 women among Liberals; (b) 1 woman CP; (c) 1 woman ALP

Source: Derived from data in *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 12<sup>th</sup> Ed., Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1957.

**Table 2. War service among Members of the Cain (Labor) and Bolte (Liberal) Cabinets, Victoria, 1955-1956**

<i>Number/Party</i>	<i>WWII</i>	<i>WW I &amp; II</i>	<i>WWI</i>
14 Liberal	8 (57.1%)	1	4
14 ALP	2 (14.3%)	0	1

Source: Derived from data in Geoff Browne, *Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1900-84*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1985.

There was little doubt that Australia, like all the combatants, was a tired nation at war's end and, inevitably, a changed nation. As the nation slowly returned to the unfamiliar condition of peace, the general clamour for a better life ran into some disturbing and inconvenient realities, one of them being housing. Donald Horne has written that it was 'the first post-war aim of tens of thousands of young Australians...to join their parents and grandparents' in home ownership<sup>4</sup> — a sort of badge of belonging in middle-class respectability. The housing shortage was a problem that dated back to the 1930s when the Depression had left a backlog in housing construction, and when wartime contingencies saw the virtual cessation of home building from 1942, the crisis merely intensified.<sup>5</sup> Public anger over the issue was palpable, particularly as it affected ex-servicemen and their families, and servicemen's organisations, especially the AIF Women's Association, actively publicised the plight of many ex-diggers who were unable to find adequate housing for their families. The anger was further stoked by evictions as the housing shortage pushed up rents that landlords demanded, often illegally.<sup>6</sup> Against the grim reality of the post-war housing shortage there contrasted free expression of the post-war dream in the form of a survey carried out by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction in which it sought to establish just what sort of amenities Australians would desire in their new homes (if they could get them). The questionnaire asked if would-be home-buyers preferred 'an entrance hall or more space in the living/dining' area; 'a small kitchen and a dining room or an eat-in kitchen and no dining room'; 'a separate store room or a larger laundry'; 'a single or two-storied house'. One correspondent writing to a women's magazine suggested that the planners were 'overlooking the fact that the five or six roomed cottage or flat is not big enough for the average family'. It was, says historian Michael McKernan, a meaningless exercise for most Australians as few people could afford a 'dream home' and, because of a shortage

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Horne, *The Australian People*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> A nation-wide survey of housing needs published in 1944 revealed a shortage of 257,521 houses comprising an 'actual shortage' of 175,940 homes and an additional 82,031 to replace structures which were classified as 'unfit for human habitation'. The report branded a further 154,899 houses as 'sub-standard' but suggested that with repairs these could be made decent. (Michael McKernan, *All In! Australia During the Second World War*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1983, p. 261.)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 262.

of materials as well as skilled labour even the most rudimentary home was beyond the reach of most.<sup>7</sup> However, as an exercise in measuring community expectations the survey revealed much about what many people wanted in terms of post-war aspirations, even if current demands could not be met. Obstacles to achieving home ownership, according to one social historian, represented ‘the disappointments of the middle class’.<sup>8</sup> The issue formed, at least at a subliminal level, a key political challenge for the contending forces in post-war Australia.

On another level, which was also to become a major political battleground, Australians were subject to a degree of government regulation that was unprecedented. It sat uneasily with the Australian spirit, and resentment against it was clearly evident. One academic critic branded it ‘regulation mania’, documenting more than 8,000 regulations issued by the Federal Government since war began — an average of five per day, including Sundays. In addition, 150 boards and committees had been established to administer the plethora of regulations and rules, and closely bound up with every other post-war aspiration was a release from this ‘petty and fussy bureaucracy’.<sup>9</sup> The spectre of continuing government intervention in the lives of the people ceased to be a mere debating point, and became ‘a real issue of practical politics’<sup>10</sup> with the Federal Labor Government’s proposals to nationalise the civil air services and later the private banks. As Menzies was to recall, it proved to be an abundant blessing for the opposition parties, with Labor, in relation to both aviation and banking, preparing the ground for just the kind of political battle his team had sought. ‘We decided, with the complete concurrence of the Country Party...to fight the battle on the obvious ground’.<sup>11</sup>

Recent events in the life of the nation had taught Menzies many lessons. The people were eager for security, both at home and abroad; the devastating experience of mass

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>8</sup> John Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies’ Australia*, University of NSW Press/Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> McKernan, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, Cassell, Melbourne, p. 295. See also p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 295.

unemployment had left deep scars. Governments had a role to play. While the Liberals retained a certain rhetorical emphasis on the efficacy of private enterprise and personal initiative in achieving prosperity, Menzies took a decisive step in promoting new doctrines that recognised the political necessity of an expanded role for the state in economic management, social welfare and education, in pursuit of full employment, social security and equality of opportunity. These had become too much a part of people's post-war expectations to be left to the uncertainty of market forces.<sup>12</sup>

Both major political parties faced a radically changed domestic environment in the years immediately after World War II. The long years of Depression, then a slow recovery followed by six years of war and deprivation left a society hungry for change and improvement. Expectations were running high and parties manoeuvred frantically to latch on to and capture the prevailing mood of post-war Australia — a bitter-sweet amalgam of weariness, loss and hope. The hope was, as one newspaper put it, bound up with 'the almost universal desire for what you might call a "better world", and with many men the determination to do something about it'.<sup>13</sup>

The experiences of the war years had brought about a subtle shift in the way that Australians regarded themselves, a move from the old bushman's ethos of a racial or a national type to an altogether more diffuse notion of 'the Australian way of life'.<sup>14</sup> The post-war immigration program offered Australians the opportunity to define more clearly who they were in contradistinction to the newcomers; further, there had been a shift of emphasis from a non-urban ethos to an urban one. On yet another level there had been a significant if subtle shift away from the future promise of post-war reconstruction to a more pragmatic reckoning with the here and now, simultaneously a celebration of what Australia was, and defending it as well as building on it.

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Aimer, 'Menzies and the Birth of the Liberal Party', in Cameron Hazlehurst (ed.) *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, pp. 233-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Argus*, 15 September 1945 (Weekend Magazine).

<sup>14</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 158. For a detailed discussion of this idea see Richard White, 'The Australian Way of Life', *Historical Studies*, Vol 18, No 73, October 1979, pp. 528-545.

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The public mood was by no means easy to discern, and historian Max Crawford has pointed to a broad inconsistency in what the public wanted and what it rejected in terms of government intervention. On the one hand there was a palpable desire for government action to prevent economic depression and to provide social services, yet ‘they were at the same time in a mood of hasty impatience with too much government’.<sup>15</sup> There was at work ‘a complex tension between the ideas of the citizen and the state, between the self-governing autonomy of individuals and social expectations about the rate of government in ensuring prosperity’.<sup>16</sup> For mass-based political parties, such as the Liberal and Labor parties, the clear challenge was to identify and grasp these fine nuances of demand and rejection, and fashion their political messages accordingly. Within this elusive and recondite equation encompassing a complex mass of aspiration and hope there lurked the key to the *zeitgeist* of post-war Australia.

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<sup>15</sup> R. M. Crawford, *Australia*, Hutchinson, London, 1952, p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 140. For a discussion on differing attitudes within the Government towards the housing issue see Murphy pp. 140-6.

## 2.2. The Liberals' King Tide

**THE RESOUNDING** victory of the Menzies-led Liberal-Country Party coalition at the Federal election in 1949 and its status as an historical as well as a political watershed have tended to obscure the battles at State level that the fledgling Liberals were still fighting, albeit with little success. That first flush of significant success, and the prospect of a brave new Liberal world, was essentially confined to the Federal arena. Labor was seemingly entrenched in Queensland (since 1932), Tasmania (1934) and New South Wales (1941); in Western Australia, a composite Liberal-Country government with the Liberals subservient, had taken office in 1947 after 14 years of Labor rule;<sup>17</sup> the Liberals ruled uneasily in minority government in Victoria; and the Liberal and Country League administration of Tom Playford in South Australia, in office since 1938, chugged along seemingly impervious to time.

For the Liberals in the two largest States of New South Wales and Victoria,<sup>18</sup> there remained serious issues to address and resolve before they could hope to emulate their Federal colleagues. Relations with the Country Party in both States were tense, and while in New South Wales the Labor government of James McGirr<sup>19</sup> appeared increasingly unpopular and inept, the Liberals at the 1950 elections still failed to dislodge Labor, despite coming tantalisingly close. While this afforded a modicum of encouragement to the new party, at the same time it served also to highlight in stark contrast some of the Liberal pluses and minuses. On the credit side was the structure and professionalism of the party organisation which brought a new and focused approach to the 1950 campaign, but on the other side of the ledger the Liberals were widely seen as dragging the chain in

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<sup>17</sup> See Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965, p 96. She notes that while 'stability was achieved very largely at Liberal expense...the new Government in theory led by [Liberal leader] McLarty was in practice led by [Country leader]Watts.'

<sup>18</sup> A coalition government formed after the 1947 election collapsed the following year when the Country Party left it, six Country Party MPs joined the Liberals and the Liberals went on to change their name to the Liberal and Country Party. (See West, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-13).

<sup>19</sup> James McGirr (1890-1957), Labor Premier of NSW 1947-52.

policy development and in providing inspiring leadership. The essential content was conspicuously lacking.

The Victorian Liberals, to an outsider, must have appeared a querulous lot: they split as a party in the lead up to the 1945 elections and performed poorly; then returned to government in 1947 but fell out within a year with their coalition partner, the Country Party; and in 1951 they dumped their leader on their way to electoral rout in 1952. It was only a series of accidents, both literally and figuratively, that brought Henry Bolte to office in 1955 — a significant point in time from which the broader Liberal ascendancy can be traced, just as much as 1949 from the purely Federal perspective.

The year 1955 was, in John Carrick's words, the 'king tide of politics for the Liberals and for Menzies'.<sup>20</sup> The Menzies government had begun its term uneasily and, with Labor controlling the Senate and frustrating the Government's program, Menzies engineered a double dissolution in 1951 that came close to disaster: while the Senate majority for the coalition was achieved, a slump in the coalition vote saw five House of Representatives seats — three Liberal and two Country Party — go to Labor. Later that same year there was another setback when the Government's proposed changes to the Constitution aimed at outlawing the Communist Party were narrowly defeated in a referendum. At the same time, serious strains were emerging in the coalition over the Liberals' preference for currency appreciation as a means of curbing runaway inflation, and Country Party ministers threatened to leave the Government in protest.<sup>21</sup> In 1952, a harsh deflationary budget did little to enhance the Government's electoral popularity, as did the imposition of import restrictions aimed at arresting a sharp deterioration in the balance of payments,<sup>22</sup> and the Liberals were further chastened by a Labor win in Victoria, and the following year a decisive win by Labor in New South Wales and the defeat in Western Australia of the coalition government. Labor now ruled in all States except South

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<sup>20</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Fadden, *They Called Me Artie*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1969, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> J. C. Horsfall, *Looking at the Liberals: A Political and Economic Analysis*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974. p. 3.

Australia.<sup>23</sup> The very survival of Menzies looked in doubt as the slide gathered momentum, Labor picking up five more seats and more than half the national vote at the 1954 election despite the dramatic defection of a Soviet diplomat, Vladimir Petrov, in Canberra amid allegations of a spy ring and public unease within Labor ranks over Evatt's spending plans.<sup>24</sup>

To many observers the much vaunted Liberal revival was all but finished. Then within that fateful year of 1955 the political tide turned with a vengeance. It was as though the ground opened up and swallowed the Australian Labor Party, writhing as it was in the throes of bitter and savage self-destruction in the split over communist influence.<sup>25</sup> From a position of imminent dominance in 1954, Labor simply fell apart as the prospect of national government vanished, and ALP governments fell in Victoria (1955), Queensland (1957) and Western Australia (1959). The one feeble glimmer of hope in the Labor firmament was seen in New South Wales where the party held together, but the State Government's majority was clearly under siege, dropping from 20 to six in 1956 and to just two in 1959.<sup>26</sup> Menzies, honoured at a dinner late in 1955 that marked his surpassing of the record of Hughes for the longest aggregate period as Prime Minister since Federation, shrewdly observed the plight of his political opponents while at the same time looking forward to a Liberal ascendancy.

While this is a point of danger for our political opponents, it is a point of danger for us, and not a time to take it easy. If we believe in the great things we stand for, we must pursue our political enemies at all times. We must not slacken but redouble our efforts. We must remember that five of our States are in the hands of our enemies, and we must work to the day when there is a Liberal Government in every State.<sup>27</sup>

The cataclysm of 1954-55 clearly hobbled Labor as a political force, as did Evatt's erratic and wounded leadership which contrasted sharply with that of Menzies who, while beset

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<sup>23</sup> W. J. Hudson, '1951-72' in F. K. Crowley, *A New History of Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, p. 507.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Robert Murray, *The Split: Australian Labor in the Fifties*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 508.

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by a multitude of problems, nevertheless was shown to be firmly in control of his party and his government, and to some extent, events themselves. He was, according to his close associates, at ‘the apex of his power’.<sup>28</sup> Yet for the chief strategists in the Liberal ranks, there was cause for considerable disquiet; the change in political fortunes for the party was fortuitous rather than the result of a broader and deeper acceptance of the party as a permanent and viable alternative to Labor. The big swing recorded in 1955 had a default dimension to it: it was *against* Labor rather than *pro* Liberal. A detailed analysis of the election result carried out by the party candidly acknowledged that the electorate really preferred Labor, and that a vote for the coalition eventuated only where Labor had failed. The assessment showed that the Federal strategy since 1953 of seeking votes on the basis of achievement had not succeeded; furthermore, with the tide seemingly flowing strongly in its favour, a divided and wounded ALP had won nearly 5 per cent more of the primary vote than the Liberals.<sup>29</sup> The extent to which the Liberals in Victoria owed their dominance to the Labor split is shown in the following table.

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<sup>27</sup> A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, Vol 2, 1944-1978, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> *Age*, 4 October 1954.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent?: The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 156.

**Table 3. Election Results in the Bolte Era 1950-1973**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Votes</b>
1950	LCP	27	40.69
	Country	13	10.64
	Labor	24	45.29
1952	LCP	11	24.85
	Country	12	8.34
	Labor	37	49.07
	Electoral Reform	4	9.59
1955	LCP	33	37.78
	Country	11	9.53
	Labor	20	32.57
	Labor (Anti-Comm)	1	12.61
	Vic Liberal	0	3.46
1958	LCP	39	37.18
	Country	9	9.29
	Labor	18	37.69
	DLP	0	14.43
1961	LCP	39	36.44
	Country	9	7.14
	Labor	17	38.55
	DLP	0	16.95
1964	LCP	38	39.63
	Country	10	8.76
	Labor	18	36.22
	DLP	0	14.97
1967	Liberal	44	37.49
	Country	12	8.65
	Labor	16	37.90
	DLP	0	14.29
1970	Liberal	42	36.70
	Country	8	6.39
	Labor	22	41.42
	DLP	0	13.30
1973	Liberal	46	42.34
	Country	8	5.96
	Labor	18	41.61
	DLP	1	7.79

Source: Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1968; Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1964-1974*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1977.

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There were seismic trends at work just beneath the visible political landscape, but in identifying and describing them there was considerable scepticism within the Liberal Party as to the strength and depth of its electoral appeal, just as there had been after the 1946 elections. Certainly, the party had retained much of the vote it won from Labor in 1949 including a proportion of trade union support; it was also attracting a section of the traditional Catholic Labor vote. Yet for all this, there was little scope for the winning of 'permanent' gains if it failed to exploit its clear 1955 mandate and its decisive majority to create 'a more conscious acceptance of the Liberal Party and of the Liberal Government'. As the Political Appreciation analysing these trends reported, beyond the party's core support there was an 'outer crowd' of Liberal voters who were 'cool and rather cynical', and with them the Government was 'popular in much the same way as a doctor is popular'.

The patient has confidence in him but his appearance does not induce the family to bring out flags. And his remedies, although tried and tested, are often designed to correct disorder. Over the years our Government has won a fine reputation for its prescriptions, but the doctor's waiting room is not the usual place to look for cheerful enthusiasts.<sup>30</sup>

While warning that 'new' Liberal voters, such as unionists and Catholics, could easily be lost, there was a saving grace in the Labor split. But what was needed in order to consolidate support was an appeal to immigrant voters<sup>31</sup> and to youth and, moreover, a revival of 'the crusading spirit of 1949' to ensure that the party remained united.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it had to present itself as modern in its outlook and in tune with contemporary society and its aspirations.

Labor, on the other hand, while still attracting around half of the vote, continued to hold the heady but unjustified belief, that it was the 'natural government' of Australia, largely on the record of administration during the war years. Yet, as the historian of the Split,

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>31</sup> That this was taken seriously at grass roots level is evidenced by the appointment in 1958 of a full-time Migrant Advisory Officer at the Liberal Party's head office in Sydney to deal with the personal problems of individual migrants. (See Katharine Holgate (West), 'The Structure of Liberal State Politics in NSW', unpublished MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1962, pp. 116-7.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 157.

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Robert Murray has written, Labor remained mired in a nostalgia for the ‘golden 1940s’ while remaining unwilling or unable to understand the 1950s. Whatever reasons there are for Labor’s failure to gain office at this time, it was a party that rarely looked at home with the era.<sup>33</sup> In a world grown increasingly complex, Labor’s approach to foreign policy remained simplistic, and was characterised by a view that the rest of the world was far away and most issues could be dismissed ‘with one or two emotionally pleasing generalisations’. This stood in stark contrast to the reality that was reported daily involving, for example, the victory of the Chinese communists in 1949, coming as it did at the end of a string of communist victories in eastern Europe and at the same time as the British, French and Dutch were preparing to leave Asia.<sup>34</sup> In an ideological sense, the great achievement of the Menzies era was to seize so convincingly the mantle of legitimacy, for it was in its sense of representing the post-war *zeitgeist* in Australia that both the tone and substance of his Government closely matched the aspirations and addressed the fears of so many Australians. The great tragedy of the Labor Party was not so much that it had split asunder but rather that it had forfeited the legitimacy<sup>35</sup> it had so clearly demonstrated during the dark years of the war. It was out of step with majority opinion<sup>36</sup> in contemporary Australia in a way that Menzies was in step. Nothing captured this more succinctly than in the public image of Menzies himself. Reproducing a photograph of Menzies from *Walkabout* magazine in 1953, showing ‘a characteristically avuncular Menzies’ outside his ‘home’ (the Lodge), social historian John Murphy notes: ‘A large part of Menzies’ political success was his ability to express middle-class values

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<sup>33</sup> Murray, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Legitimacy is used here in the sense that Horne has used it as in representing ‘ideas of legality and trust’ that are implied by behaviour. (Donald Horne, ‘Political Legitimacy in Australia’, in R. Lucy (ed.) *The Pieces of Politics*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1979, p. 134). Connell and Gould are even more explicit in their application of legitimacy in regard to consensus politics when, writing about the 1966 election, they note that ‘one party is dominant because its outlook has become identified with the consensus of opinion of the electors...’ and that opposition groups ‘whose political beliefs are outside this consensus have no possibility of electoral success: they are not regarded as legitimate rulers or potential rulers...’ (R. W. Connell and Florence Gould, *Politics of the Extreme Right: Warringah 1966*, Sydney Studies in Politics 7, Sydney University Press, 1967, p. 100).

<sup>36</sup> Despite the closeness in political support between the coalition and Labor, Menzies today would be seen as winning support from aspirational voters; it was a key to his success in contrast to Labor’s more traditional appeal.

and aspirations about home and the private realm as a place of personal meaning and identity'.<sup>37</sup>

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The 'king tide' was starting to become apparent by 1955 as the scarcity of the war years receded and a new prosperity was everywhere. Australia, with its political stability, abundant resources and potential for growth, attracted substantial foreign investment, especially in the manufacturing sector; the industrial expansion 'rearranged the skylines of the capital cities, expanded career opportunities for medium management strata, and generally seemed to be making good the promise that Australia would evolve into a modern, industrial society'.<sup>38</sup> The great theme of 'national development' ushered in after the war gathered momentum as vast projects were unveiled — oil refinery programs on a massive scale, extensions to iron and steel mills, new factories and plants, and rapid headway on home building now running at 75,000 houses a year. During 1953-54, the initially unpopular economic measures<sup>39</sup> were starting to pay dividends: civilian employment rose by 90,000; prices and wages stabilised; national income soared by 5 per cent; and metal production exceeded previous record levels. Retail sales showed a sharp rise and personal consumption expenditure climbed an astonishing 10 per cent on the previous year. The following table indicates the sharp rise in the standard of living after the war.

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<sup>37</sup> Murphy, *op. cit.*, between pp. 146-9.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Rowse, *Australian Liberalism and National Character*, Kibble Books, Malmsbury, 1978, p. 191.

<sup>39</sup> It is clear that Menzies won kudos for taking unpopular Budget decisions, and this served to underpin the ensuing prosperity. One economist wrote: 'The significance of the 1951 budget and the steps which followed from it was that the inflationary spiral was checked and that this was done without more than 2% of the work force being unemployed. A new period of greater economic stability was ushered in to span the rest of the 1950s and most of the 1960s.' W. A. Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1975, p. 243.

**Table 4. Personal consumption per head in Australia**

(index numbers, base 1948-49 =100, at 1959-60 prices)

1938-39	73
1949-50	103
1959-60	114
1968-69	136

Source: W. A. Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1976, p. 248.

At its most spectacular, prosperity was evidenced by the boom in motor car and home appliance sales.<sup>40</sup> Even on the political Left there was a grudging acknowledgement of change in the form of a ‘desire to modernise politics and cultural life’, and that the ‘older imagery of contending forces and policies’ was out of date. A traditional Left view of politics ‘seemed *passé* and even dangerously naïve’.<sup>41</sup>

The hopes that were entertained in the immediate post-war era were of heroic proportions; nothing less than a brave new world would suffice. The notion of ‘national development’ was one that resonated strongly with the post-war mood. This was acknowledged by both sides of politics in Australia and, indeed, it was the ALP that set in train the massive and futuristic Snowy Mountains hydro-electricity scheme which in many ways became an apt symbol for the big thinking with which the term ‘national development’ was associated. It was also the ALP that set up the Australian National

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<sup>40</sup> *The First Ten Years: The Menzies Government 1949-1959*, Liberal Party of Australia, n.d. p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Rowse, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

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University and laid the foundations for the migration program — but it was the good fortune of the incoming Menzies Government to win office in 1949, and it was that government's good political sense not only to retain Labor's projects but actually bring them to fruition and, in so doing, win the developmental plaudits from an admiring and grateful voting public. There was clearly discerned in public opinion a 'basic unanimity on the need for development and for a greater population'.<sup>42</sup> In seizing the moment, Menzies saw even more clearly than Labor that this was the prevailing mood of the people, and he spoke to the people in that language which Labor singularly failed to do. This was acknowledged by Arthur Calwell, deputy leader under Evatt and ALP leader from 1960-67, when he wrote that the ALP had failed to grasp just how much society had changed in the immediate post-war years, and that the people 'had new ambitions, new hopes, new tastes, new desires'. Acknowledging that the ALP was distracted by its own internal troubles, Calwell was nonetheless blunt in admitting that 'we failed to bring our message to the people in language that had real relevance to the Fifties'.<sup>43</sup>

The popular association in the public mind of the Liberal Party and the new prosperity was a key characteristic of the Liberal ascendancy, but this was not left to chance. By 1955, the party was able to campaign on its record of solid achievements in terms of economic growth in a way that suggested it alone was responsible for national development and the post-war economic boom.<sup>44</sup> To further this association in the public mind, there was a special 'Australia Unlimited' campaign to promote the national development image, launched in 1957 with an eye on the election due the following year. Menzies was allocated a key role, and his well publicised 'meet the people' tours of the late 1950s and early 1960s were always arranged in such a way as to incorporate visits to key national development projects such as the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor, outside Sydney.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J. B. Condliffe, *The Development of Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1964, p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> A. A. Calwell, *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1963, p. 65.

<sup>44</sup> Marian Simms, *A Liberal Nation. The Liberal Party & Australian Politics*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, pp. 57-8.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

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The rhetoric of national development has been little studied, but its use by the Liberals in their era of ascendancy was of crucial importance in establishing their hegemony. It has, to be sure, a certain motherhood quality about it: as Peter Loveday has commented: ‘It connotes growth and progress and no one dare say in politics that he is opposed to either’.<sup>46</sup> For the Liberal Party, the very vagueness served two useful purposes. On the one hand, it signalled a commitment to growth and modernisation that fed on the post-war dream of a bigger and better (and more secure) Australia; less obviously it also served to deflect potential criticism from within Liberal ranks or the business community about the degree or extent of government intervention in the economy.<sup>47</sup> At the purely political level, the constant reiteration of the theme of national development, the achievements already won and those in the pipeline contrasted sharply with the Labor Party which, while by no means less committed to national development, was constantly seen to be mired in its own all-consuming affairs. Variations on this theme repeated endlessly through the later 1950s and into the 1960s, and the message was a potent and powerful one that clearly advantaged the Liberals as much as it damaged Labor. One such occasion among many was on the eve of the fateful State election in Western Australia in early 1959 which saw the Labor Government defeated and the inauguration of 12 years of coalition rule that were to add the West’s lustre to the Liberal ascendancy. On the same day that the *West Australian* took the ALP to task in a leader critical of ‘back-door socialism’ in the State that had reduced opportunities for employment by retarding industrial development, there was a news item from Victoria about the deposed former Labor State executive, now the DLP, seeking a court order against a bank from paying the rival ALP Executive the proceeds from matured investment bonds.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, it painted a picture of Labor as petty, bickering and mired in the past.

The ‘king tide’ of 1955 that saw Henry Bolte surge to power in Victoria came on the crest of the development wave, and Bolte positioned himself from day one to ride that wave. He was, as Carrick has noted, the right man in the right place at the right time.

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Loveday, ‘Liberals and the Idea of Development’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, August 1977, p. 219.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 224.

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Bolte was the supreme pragmatist...To talk to him you met an ordinary Australian who liked a glass of beer and thought the ordinary imperfections of Australia were OK, thanks. That's Bolte. His philosophy was let's get it done. It was time for Bolte in '55.<sup>49</sup>

The notions of 'progress', 'development' and growth' were very much a part of the idea of 'the Australian way of life', and it was demonstrably part of the present not the distant future; it had become, as Richard White has argued, 'taken for granted as an essential feature of an established social pattern and set of values'.<sup>50</sup>

Certainly, the wins by Bolte in 1955 in Victoria, by David Brand in Western Australia in 1959 and by Askin in New South Wales in 1965, when seen in conjunction with the string of successes put together by Menzies, represented the high watermark for the post-war Liberals; it was also a resounding victory for pragmatism and a vindication, albeit belated, of those who founded the Liberal Party. Here was the decisive break with the Liberal Party's predecessors; it was, as Carrick has said, a party with a real base.

There was a feeling: this party's real. It was a beginning of the focus on the leaders. Without this Askin could not have won because he would not have had a political party, for one thing. The Askins and Boltes didn't have the ability to project philosophy, the ability to project principles; they projected pragmatism.<sup>51</sup>

Pragmatism was timely in 1955, especially as Labor was seen daily devouring its own in the name of ideology. Bolte would have none this, campaigning as he did on two basic issues: improving Victoria's allocation of income-tax revenues from the current position of where Victorians paid more per head and got back less in return than any other State, and attracting foreign development capital to Victoria.<sup>52</sup> His 'sell Victoria' campaigns began in 1956, and by the time of the 1958 election he was able to claim that since he had

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<sup>48</sup> *West Australian*, 19 March 1959, p. 6, p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Richard White, 'The Australian Way of Life,' *op. cit.*, p. 532.

<sup>51</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

been elected Victoria had attracted 50 per cent of foreign capital invested in Australia and 40 per cent of the migrant intake.<sup>53</sup> There is little doubt that political instability had disadvantaged Victoria, and Bolte immediately set about rejuvenating the State economy.

The development achievements of the Bolte Government were highly visible, and while rapid immigration and encouragement of foreign investment were policies championed by Menzies at the Federal level, Bolte cleverly blended ‘old-fashioned boosterism with intense State parochialism’ to exploit these policies for Victoria’s benefit.<sup>54</sup> In quick succession, Bolte was able to see huge expansion to the petro-chemical industry at Altona, Dandenong and West Footscray, an aluminium smelter at Point Henry near Geelong and a significant addition to Victoria’s oil refining capacity with a new BP Plant at Crib Point.<sup>55</sup> Bolte was also at the fore in securing the 1965 preliminary agreement between the Commonwealth and the States over jurisdiction of offshore resources while securing agreements over the Bass Strait oil and gas fields with Canberra and Esso-BHP. Well aware of the high expectations raised about development, his political sense enabled him to see the advantages in swift exploitation, while also acknowledging once again his luck.

Probably the best thing which happened for Victoria in my time as Premier was the discovery and development of the natural gas fields in Bass Strait. Obviously I had nothing to do with the gas being there – we were looking for oil, actually – but once I knew it was I did my damndest to get it out of the seabed and into Victorian homes as quickly, and cheaply, as possible.<sup>56</sup>

Bolte’s standing in Victoria, consolidated by his undoubted achievements in bringing significant and visible development, was high, and he had little difficulty in retaining all his 39 seats at the elections in 1961<sup>57</sup> despite a slump in support for the Federal coalition over the tough ‘credit squeeze’ measures which had sent unemployment soaring.

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<sup>52</sup> Brian Galligan, ‘Victoria: the political economy of a Liberal State’, in Brian Head (ed.), *The Politics of Development in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p. 116.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Blazey, *Bolte: A Political Biography*, Mandarin, Melbourne, 1990, p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 118-9.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Prior, *Bolte by Bolte*, Craftsman, Melbourne, 1990, p. 92.

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Indeed, Bolte had much to do with saving the Menzies Government in 1961: Victoria was the only State in which the Liberals did not lose seats, although the Liberal vote dropped by almost 3 per cent.<sup>58</sup> In an incisive analysis of the election campaign, the Liberal Party's Victorian secretary listed a number of factors instrumental in the Liberals holding the line in Victoria — the well-organised DLP vote, the sound electoral organisation of the party, the poor image of Labor in Victoria, the favourable image of the Liberal Party over the previous six years and, in particular, the 'personal popularity of Henry Bolte'.<sup>59</sup> It was little wonder then that in 1964 Bolte could go to the people with an election campaign speech that not only attacked the 'Left-wing elements' in the Labor Party but with an impressive array of concrete achievements — unemployment in Victoria was only 0.8 per cent against a national average of 1.2 per cent, savings bank deposits in the State had reached record levels, and Victoria led the nation with 75 per cent of all houses and flats either owned or being purchased by those occupying them, with sales of Housing Commission homes increasing from 50 in 1955 to almost 19,000. In addition, Victorian financial assistance to universities had increased from £1 m. (\$2 m.) in 1955 to £4.5 m. (\$9 m.) in 1964.<sup>60</sup> A year after he retired, Bolte could take justifiable pride in his achievements, which he quantified in a speech in 1973.

During the 17 years that I happened to be leader, Victoria's population increased by over 50 per cent. It had taken 100 years for the Melbourne University to reach 5,000 students; 17 years later we had 3 universities and we had an institute of colleges with, in all about 47,000 students receiving tertiary education. We had the influx of foreign capital in such cases as the petro-chemical industry which went to Altona, as a package deal involving the leading chemical companies in the world as a consortium. It's the overall development of this State that's given me the greatest satisfaction. The levelling out of social and educational opportunities are some of the things that I feel very happy about...<sup>61</sup>

In New South Wales, where the development theme was not as powerful as it was elsewhere, Askin, while late on the scene in terms of the Liberal Ascendancy, still spoke the language but infused it with a concern for decentralisation, a key concern of his

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<sup>57</sup> Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, p. 495.

<sup>58</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>61</sup> The 1973 James N. Kirby Paper, presented in Melbourne by Sir Henry Bolte, 16 September 1973.

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coalition partner, the Country Party. Cleverly equating Liberal government with boundless opportunity and a decisive break with the (Labor) past, he said on his return from a promotional tour abroad in 1968 that more Australians — especially parliamentarians, businessmen, sportsmen and tourists — should travel overseas, commenting: ‘We have been isolated for many, many years...Now our big chance has come’. He revealed that he had in London spoken to ‘a great number of people’ all of whom were ‘most interested’ in investment or further investment in New South Wales. They had heard of the iron ore finds in Western Australia, and the natural gas and oil finds in Bass Strait ‘but not New South Wales’s cotton industry at Wee Waa or the rutilic mining’.<sup>62</sup> By 1970 he could look back on five years in government that he characterised as ‘a period of intense rebuilding and restoration’, and that his government had ‘done things faster, cheaper and better by more realistic priorities than in the past’.

In our five years of government, there has been record full employment in this State. The rate of development has so accelerated that New South Wales, which was badly trailing the field, is now the pace-setter of the States. This means greater job opportunities and higher living standards...The rate of building development is an all-time high, reflecting confidence in the future of the State...These are exciting times. This State is really on the move and we will be going even faster when we finally get rid of Labor’s legacy of neglect.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1968.

<sup>63</sup> Speech by Askin at Masonic Hall, Kensington, on 3 February 1970 in support of endorsed Liberal candidate for the Randwick by-election, Mr J. R. McLaughlin.

**Table 5: Election Results in the Askin Era 1959-1973**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Votes</b>
1959	Liberal	28	35.35
	Country	16	8.38
	Labor	49	49.12
	DLP	0	1.32
1962	Liberal	25	34.85
	Country	14	9.37
	Labor	54	48.57
	DLP	0	1.49
1965	Liberal	31	39.58
	Country	16	10.23
	Labor	45	43.30
	DLP	0	2.11
1968	Liberal	36	38.47
	Country	17	10.62
	Labor	39	43.10
	DLP	0	2.29
1971	Liberal	32	35.74
	Country	17	8.65
	Labor	45	45.02
	DLP	0	3.17
1973	Liberal	34	33.85
	Country	18	10.48
	Labor	44	42.93
	DLP	0	5.95

Source: Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1968; Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1964-1974*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1977.

### 2.3. Emancipation of the Catholic Vote

**THE AFTERMATH** of the war saw a great many changes taking place in Australian society, and at the political level there was from the watershed year of 1949 a discernible electoral realignment in progress; voters were moving away from the ALP and towards the Liberal-Country Party coalition at both Federal and State level. Of particular significance in this process was the erosion of hitherto Catholic support for the ALP.<sup>64</sup> Just how this was managed tactically and strategically by Liberal leaders at both Federal and State levels proved to be a critical test of leadership, both in style and substance given the historical sectarian strains in Australian public life, and it formed a key pillar in the rise of a post-war Liberal ascendancy. If the wartime experience had lessened those influences, as Carrick suggests, it remained a significant political challenge for the Liberals to capitalise on the realignment and the beginning of an apparent shift in traditional loyalties.

The creation of the Democratic Labor Party out of the dissident Catholic Right wing of the Labor Party was clearly instrumental in channelling votes away from the ALP in State and Federal elections, and in the process considerably weakened the traditional Labor-Catholic nexus to the extent that it could no longer be regarded as a largely captive bloc of votes for the ALP.<sup>65</sup> It was a form of political emancipation for many Australian Catholics, as Patrick O'Farrell has written of the aftermath of the great Labor split.

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<sup>64</sup> John Warhurst, 'Catholics, Communism and the Australian Party System: a study of the Menzies years', *Politics* XIV (2), November, 1979, p. 239.

<sup>65</sup> There has been much debate about the extent and the nature of the connection between Catholicism and Labor, but there is ample evidence that many Catholics saw this nexus as the natural State. In 1960, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Bishop Fox, drew attention to this link when he declared: 'The ALP is not effectively opposing the Communist Party. If the Australian Labor Party was a decent Party we would vote for it to put it into power. We are Labor people. We would be happy if there was a Labor Party founded on solid principles which would govern this country. It would do a lot of good'. (Quoted in R. N. Spann, 'The Catholic Vote in Australia' in Henry Mayer (ed.) *Catholics and the Free Society: An Australian Symposium*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1961, p. 115).

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Perhaps even more importantly, the end of the slavish attachment to Labor changed the status of the political activities and votes of Catholics from those of prisoners to those of desirable, sought-after supporters. The desertion of a sufficiently large proportion of the Catholic vote to support the continued existence of a third party, exclude Labor from office, and maintain a Liberal-Country Party government, has demonstrated that Catholic opinion is a vital political factor, not to be ignored as it was formerly. And the issue of most concern to Catholics is education. It is significant that Liberal governments – beneficiaries of the end of the old Catholic-Labor order -- have made increasing grants available to Catholic schools; the decision of State governments late in 1967 to give direct aid to pupils in independent schools, a decision which conceded a principle of vital importance to Catholics, is in this context.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, it was the narrow win by Askin in New South Wales in 1965 that is widely seen as the turning point in enticing a significant bloc of the Catholic vote<sup>67</sup> away from Labor. In the immediate aftermath of the poll, and with an eye on its Federal implications, a political correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* opined that ‘...the ALP no longer commands the almost monolithic support of Roman Catholics in Australia’.<sup>68</sup> The fact that Labor could not or would not change its policies to meet the demand for State aid displayed a lack of flexibility and, even worse, as the *Herald* pointed out, reflected poorly on the ALP leadership, especially Mr Calwell, as ‘living in the past’. Labor had misjudged its Catholic constituency, and to many Catholics whose lot was improving the ALP no longer so completely articulated their aspirations. It has been said that if the DLP had not emerged when it did someone would have had to invent it.<sup>69</sup>

The winds of reform were being felt acutely within the Catholic Church at the time of the Second Vatican Council, and here again was another confluence: just as the traditional political allegiance of many Australian Catholics was undergoing a revision,<sup>70</sup> so, too,

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<sup>66</sup> Patrick O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church in Australia: A Short History 1788-1967*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1968, p. 273.

<sup>67</sup> Just what constitutes the ‘Catholic vote’ remains a matter for debate. Spann notes that from 1946-54, about 70 per cent of Catholics in Gallup Poll samples expressed the intention of voting Labor, and in the Federal elections of 1955 and 1958 the percentage of Catholics voting ALP fell sharply (Spann, *op. cit.*, p. 115). ‘The Catholic Vote in Australia’ in Henry Mayer (ed.) *Catholics and the Free Society: An Australian Symposium*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1961, p. 115)

<sup>68</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 1965.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ormonde, *The Movement*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1972, p. 159.

<sup>70</sup> The general intellectual climate cannot be ignored in this respect, and particularly so in the public debate about communism and related issues, and the staunch anti-communist position taken by the Liberal Party. An insightful article by Brian Buckley (‘Catholic Dilemmas: Beyond Liberalism and the New Wave’

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was their very relationship with the Church and its teachings. It was a time of considerable flux, and the emergence of a high degree of 'upward social mobility' that had the immediate effect of lessening social and political tribalism in Australia. Concern about communism had long been felt by many in the labour movement, especially Catholics; but in the immediate post-war years this presented many concerned Catholics, unhappy with the union movement's penetration by communists, with a political dilemma if they hesitated to cast their votes for the ALP as the Liberal Party 'did not provide an attractive alternative for many Catholics, and was believed to be strongly influenced by Masons and sectarian elements'.<sup>71</sup> With the advent of the Split and the formation of the DLP, a large slice of the traditional Catholic vote was denied to the ALP; with the apparent failure of several furtive attempts to affect a reconciliation<sup>72</sup> and the eventual withering away of the DLP, that vote no longer had a traditional home and it was as inevitable as it was painless that some of it found its way to the coalition parties. That was one of the key characteristics of the Liberal ascendancy, and it was assisted in no uncertain manner by Commonwealth State aid policy, and its skilful handling, as former DLP Senator Frank McManus has written.

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*Bulletin*, 26 February 1966) analyses Catholic angst, especially towards some middle-of-the-road positions adopted by influential organs such as the *Catholic Worker*. The attitudes described by Buckley indicate a broader shift towards the Liberal Party on some vital issues. He writes: 'Until a few years ago it was almost possible to divide Catholics into liberal and non-liberal according to their attitudes to the Santamaria 'movement'. Over the past five or seven years, however, there has been a significant divergence of opinion among Catholic liberals in their attitude to Santamaria, the DLP, politics and liberalism itself. It was most apparent by the attack on the *Catholic Worker* by *Critic*, an educational and social broadsheet produced by a number of Melbourne Catholic graduates, mostly in their late twenties. Many factors have contributed to this cleavage: the slow tightening of the grip of the Communist and fellow-travelling union machine on important sectors of the ALP; the Communist military challenge in South-East Asia; the transparency of Communist "manipulation" of people of goodwill at "peace" conferences and other fronts; the filtering-down of the full horror of the details of the Khrushchev 20th Congress speech and the repression of the Hungarian Revolution; the penetrating attacks on "gutless, amorphous, gelatinous" liberals by men such as James McAuley; the powerful analytical anti-Communism of Dr Frank Knopfelmacher and his brilliant seminars at Melbourne University; increasing familiarity of the writings of Orwell, Arendt, Hook, Aron and other highly intelligent anti-Communists; and even the broadening political analyses of Santamaria and some of his top cadres.'

<sup>71</sup> Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy? Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 143.

<sup>72</sup> For a brief account see B. A. Santamaria, *Santamaria: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 210-2. See also article referred to by Santamaria by Norman Abjorensen, *Canberra Times*, 18 November 1995.

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The grants for science laboratories and libraries could have sparked some sectarian jealousies, but the grants allocation was splendidly handled by the [Federal] Minister for Education, John Gorton. His arrangements were so effective that the Liberal and Country Party coalition reaped the reward of almost unanimous public approval, while the Labor Party lost favour among voters whose children were in independent schools.<sup>73</sup>

The Catholic writer Edmund Campion has described the wrenching effect of economically-improving Catholics deserting the ALP in what he has characterised as ‘a profound shift in the Australian social and political landscape’.

Since the Second World War, Catholics had been socially on the rise. They were still predominantly working class. Yet, here and there, one could detect signs of class change, of a movement across the social register towards the middle class. Still, whatever individual changes might occur, as a community their sympathies (and their votes) stayed with the Labor movement. Despite the sociological changes, it would have been psychologically impossible for many of the newly affluent Catholic middle class to go against the working-class traditions of their own community and vote non-Labor. They went on voting Labor, whatever their personal class interests. Then came the Split in the mid-1950s. The appearance of the Democratic Labor Party gave the new Catholic middle class an opportunity to stop voting for the Australian Labor Party without seeming to be anti-Labor. The DLP detached these voters from the ALP. In time, with the withering away of the DLP, they could attach themselves comfortably to the conservative coalition parties. The appearance in recent years [*this was written in 1982*] of Catholics in the Liberal Party machine and among coalition candidates, something that would have been unimaginable a quarter of a century ago, is one indicator of a profound shift in the Australian social and political landscape.<sup>74</sup>

The social mobility of Catholics as a class over a long period has also been noted by Crisp as a factor affecting traditional political allegiance, especially as more Catholics have had access to greater secondary and tertiary education, an increasing concern among them over Catholic social and economic doctrine, and the emergence of a native-born Australian priesthood gradually replacing the Irish-born and Irish-educated.<sup>75</sup> It is altogether too glib to assert, as Robert Alford does, that the rise of the DLP represented a stepping-stone out of the ALP for upwardly mobile Catholics.<sup>76</sup> This is to overlook the intensity of, and downplay the significance of, the anti-Communist cause that ignited tensions inside the ALP; they were religious and political more than they were, if at all,

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<sup>73</sup> Frank McManus, *The Tumult and the Shouting*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977, p. 163.

<sup>74</sup> Edmund Campion, *Rockchoppers: Growing up Catholic in Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> L. F. Crisp, *Australian National Government*, Longman, Melbourne, 1965, pp. 214-5.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Alford, *Party and Society: the Anglo-American Democracies*, Rand McNally and Co., Chicago, 1963, p. 191.

class-based. The long leavening process in Australian society since World War I, described earlier by Carrick, suggests that a broader time frame of gradual change in attitudes was at work; the issue of communism served as a catalyst. Judith Brett has turned the argument about by arguing that the identification of Catholics with Labor had much to do with the ‘Protestantism of the nonlabour parties which made them inhospitable places for Australian Catholics’.<sup>77</sup> The following table shows the disparity in Catholic representation in the Commonwealth parliament by party affiliation.

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**Table 6: Religion of Labor and Non-Labor Members 1901-80 (% in each category)**

	Labor	Non-Labor
n.	417	612
Catholic	36.0	7.7

Source: Joan Rydon, *A Federal Legislature: The Australian Commonwealth Parliament 1901-1980*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, p. 141.

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Just as Menzies triumphed in the Commonwealth arena with adept policies of State aid, pragmatic State Liberal leaders Henry Bolte and Robin Askin skilfully courted Catholic support as a crucial part of their electoral bases. As will be seen, it was the plain-speaking earthiness of Bolte which enabled him to rub conspiratorial shoulders with the dissidents from the Cain Government and successfully plot its demise — a political event that had nothing at all to do with class or social aspirations. He also managed to keep most of the dissidents onside in the years after the split by listening to their claims and taking many of their policy positions on board. In Askin’s case, his initial caution in embracing the State aid issue proved to be sound politics, faced as he was with considerable anti-Catholic sentiment in his own Liberal ranks. Given that there was a

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<sup>77</sup> Judith Brett, ‘Class, Religion and the Foundation of the Australian Party System: A Revisionist

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degree of uneasiness among Catholics about Protestants and their influence in the Liberal Party, Askin's own persona, and his known fondness for a beer and a bet, would have allayed some of these misgivings. Frank McManus has written of fears expressed to him that if the Liberals were elected in New South Wales (and that was before Askin became leader) they would legislate to ban housie-housie to the financial detriment of the Catholic church and its fund raising.<sup>78</sup>

Quite clearly, many and complex influences were at work undermining the Catholic-Labor nexus; it was a significant political challenge for the largely Protestant coalition parties to seek, win and retain this potential new support. It was, in the end, a triumph for a new style of leader, in each instance it was a matter of proving to be 'dinkum'. In doing so it laid a key plank in the edifice that was the Liberal ascendancy.

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Interpretation', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 37, No 1 (2002), p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> McManus, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

## 2.4. Liberal Resurgence in the West

**WESTERN** Australia was for long a stronghold of the ALP which occupied the treasury benches in the State parliament between 1924 and 1947 for all but three years.<sup>79</sup> The Opposition for much of that period was seriously bereft of talent, finding it difficult to attract and retain the services of capable men, especially on a full-time basis.<sup>80</sup> The pre-Liberal Nationalists were consistently outflanked by the Country Party, and until the new Liberal Party won the farming seat of Greenough at a by-election in 1945 its only seat outside the Perth metropolitan area and south-west region was Pilbara in the north, which was won from Labor in 1933 and held until 1939.<sup>81</sup> The result, with the changing of the guard in 1947 when Labor lost six seats and was replaced by a Liberal-Country Party coalition, was 'as narrow as it was unexpected'; four of the ALP seats were lost by fewer than one hundred votes each, and Labor came close to winning Albany from the Country Party. As close as it was, the mood for a change was apparent as Labor had become 'stale and incapable of satisfying the aspirations of many of its followers'.<sup>82</sup>

The new Liberal Party, however, was anything but confident with the parliamentary leader, Ross McDonald, stepping down as late as December 1946, convinced of little chance of electoral success in the immediate future. But change was occurring, and the first parliamentarian elected in 1945 under the new Liberal Party banner was thirty-three year old David Brand, son of a struggling farming family who went to the goldfields and worked as a wage labourer until the outbreak of war. He enlisted as a private in the 2/11 Battalion of the Sixth Division, AIF, and embarked for Egypt in April 1940. He saw action through North Africa, taking part in the first advance through Libya, Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi; he was promoted corporal. He also served in Greece

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<sup>79</sup> David Black, 'The Era of Labor Ascendancy 1924-1947' in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, p. 406.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>81</sup> David Black, 'The Liberal Party and its Predecessors', in Ralph Pervan & Campbell Sharman (eds), *Essays on Western Australian Politics*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1979, p. 206.

where he was wounded in 1941, evacuated to Alexandria and after 12 months in hospital repatriated to Australia.<sup>83</sup> After being invalided out of the army in 1942 he worked full time in the Volunteer Defence Corps before acquiring a small store at Dongara where he came to the notice of Liberal Party organisers ‘to whom he epitomised the hoped-for appeal to youth, ex-servicemen and the spirit of individual enterprise’.<sup>84</sup> His recruitment typified the new approach of the Liberal Party which Black has characterised as presenting ‘an image that captured the imagination of the post-war generation in a way that its political opponents were unable to emulate’.<sup>85</sup>

Although the uneasy coalition between the Liberals (known as the Liberal and Country League) and the Country Party (Country and Democratic League) came to an end at the 1953 election with a jump in the ALP vote of almost 8 per cent, Brand, then Minister for Works in the last year of the McLarty-Watts Government, was instrumental in sealing the deal for an oil refinery to be built at Kwinana, south of Perth. In what was to be a highly successful formula in years to come, Brand committed the Government to provide the necessary infrastructure — electricity, water, roads and railways, a safe channel to the open sea and the construction of a thousand State-built homes for workers in the first three years.<sup>86</sup> Much of the industrial expansion championed by Brand was put on hold when Labor returned to office in 1953.

The Cabinet formed by Bert Hawke was ‘very much in the traditional mould’; although only three members had served in the previous Labor Government, the average age was nearly 56 and all but one of the ten ministers had sat in parliament for more than ten years, and one, an upper house Minister, had graced the backbenches for 25 years.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Black, ‘The Era of Labor Ascendancy’, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

<sup>83</sup> G.S.Reid & M.R.Oliver, *The Premiers of Western Australia 1890-1982*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1982, p. 90.

<sup>84</sup> Black, ‘The Era of Labor Ascendancy’, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

<sup>85</sup> Black, ‘The Liberal Party and its Predecessors’, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>86</sup> David Black, ‘Liberals Triumphant – The Politics of Development 1947-1980’, in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 442.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 447.

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While the Labor Government strove to further industrial development and build much-needed schools, it was in many ways hamstrung by its union links<sup>88</sup> and, despite winning a second term in 1956, its lustre rapidly faded as it struggled to meet new aspirations.<sup>89</sup> While the Labor Split did not have the same impact in the west as elsewhere, the Liberals nevertheless campaigned relentlessly against Labor's 'socialism', which Liberal leader Brand saw epitomised in the draconian unfair trading and profit control laws he called 'an unnatural approach, an inhuman approach' forced on the ALP by 'one or two of the union leaders'.<sup>90</sup> By the time of the 1959 campaign, the theme had been well established; Liberal advertising accused the Labor Government of having 'locked out progress', and of having turned the 'Golden West' into a 'Western Desert'. The Liberals made much of the fact that not one new major industry had been established in the State since the Kwinana refinery, and that overseas investors had been discouraged by the operation of the unfair trading legislation. It was further claimed that inefficient and costly State trading monopolies had squeezed out private enterprise, and the result of six years of Labor had been 'an era of lost opportunities' characterised by 'control, suspicion and stagnation'.<sup>91</sup>

The appeal to the electorate was couched unambiguously in the language of development and prosperity: the undeveloped potential of Western Australia depended on attracting capital, establishing new industries and encouraging all forms of private enterprise. Brand hammered away at this message in his campaign.

It must be our policy as soon as a Government is formed to show our definite intention to make W. A. a State in which private enterprise and investment are welcome and can feel secure...If the job of developing the State is to proceed we must restore confidence

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<sup>88</sup> The Government insisted that all its printing work be done by the Government Printing Office, and tendering for public construction work was virtually abandoned in favour of an expanded Public Works Department and the use of day labour. As a result, private contractors were virtually excluded, a situation exacerbated by the sourcing of building materials primarily from the State Building Supplies, State Engineering Works and the Midland Junction Railway Workshop. (See David Black, 'The Changing Nature of the Australian Labor Party', in Pervan & Sharman, *op. cit.*, p. 141).

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>90</sup> Brand interview, 2:1/22-3.

<sup>91</sup> F. K. Crowley, *The Fall of the Hawke Government: A Brief Account*, privately published, Perth, 1959, p. 34.

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and provide encouragement and incentive to people everywhere to work and invest in the West.<sup>92</sup>

It was an appeal deliberately and carefully crafted to create a clear distinction between it and the ALP which had traditionally, and especially in its long reign from 1933-1947, been characterised by a 'general distrust of large-scale capital, coupled with a view that large-scale investment projects were, in any case, improbable'. Some of this attitude remained with the Hawke Government which had its own suspicions about 'monopoly capital' (such as BHP) and foreign capital.<sup>93</sup> The Liberals found a strong ally in the *West Australian* which was critical of the Hawke Government's 'back-door socialism' which was turning away capital and reducing employment opportunities by retarding industrial development.

The disturbing thing about Western Australia today is the pursuit of a militant, stop-at-nothing socialism that inevitably frightens private capital away and reduces the Government pool of money for schools, hospitals and other essential needs. By restricting the output of local goods it makes Western Australia more dependent on imports from the Eastern States.<sup>94</sup>

With the coalition being returned to power on 21 March 1959, with the help of DLP preferences,<sup>95</sup> the *West Australian* hailed the victory, noting that the incoming government had been given a mandate of restoring confidence, stimulating development and bolstering State finances.<sup>96</sup> Brand, and his dynamic Minister for Industrial Development Charles Court, set about their task with zeal, heralding a new age for

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<sup>92</sup> *West Australian*, 23 March 1959.

<sup>93</sup> Brian Head, 'Western Australia: the pursuit of growth', in Head (ed.) *The Politics of Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>94</sup> *West Australian*, 19 March 1959.

<sup>95</sup> Communist influence in trade unions in Western Australia had been minimal and there was little support for Industrial Groups which had been officially proscribed in 1948. However, it was not possible to isolate Western Australia from the turmoil that engulfed the ALP in 1954, especially as four of the six delegates at the Hobart conference were anti-Evatt and the State secretary of the ALP, F. E. Chamberlain, was a key Evatt supporter and a figure of considerable controversy. Chamberlain's influence may explain some of the malaise that infected the ALP in Western Australia in the 1950s, especially in light of his oft-quoted remark that 'the task of winning seats and finally government' had to remain 'secondary to the primary task of formulating policy based upon the socialist objective'. It was not a philosophy that commended itself to development hungry Western Australia. (See Black, 'Liberals Triumphant', *op. cit.*, pp. 449-451).

<sup>96</sup> *West Australian*, 23 March 1959.

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Western Australia, and going on to win three more elections. The economy was transformed with staggering rapidity as investment flowed in and development mushroomed with the expansion of the Kwinana industrial complex, new mining ventures in the Pilbara and exploitation of the oil and gas reserves on the Northwest Shelf. By 1967, the annual value of manufacturing production overtook that of the farming sector and from the mid-1960s, after twenty years of relative stagnation, the mineral export industries began to have a major impact on the State's economy. In 1970, the value of mineral products exceeded that of farm products for the first time.<sup>97</sup>

Under the leadership of the unassuming David Brand, Western Australia was dramatically transformed in the space of a few years; by 1968 it was possible to discontinue the State's annual supplication to the Commonwealth Grants Commission for a special grant.<sup>98</sup> The argument that development would have happened anyway is a spurious one: Brand and Court were unusually aggressive in their pursuit of investment, seeking out foreign corporations with promises of government assistance.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Head, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-5.

<sup>98</sup> Reid & Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>99</sup> Head, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-8.

## 2.5. South Australia and the Playford Era

**THE ROLE** of South Australia in the post-war Liberal ascendancy is a curious one in that a Liberal Government was already well established before the war and spanned the pre-war, war and post-war years (admittedly under a favourable electoral system). It is also curious in that the sun that was to set on the Liberal ascendancy set first in South Australia.

When the arch-pragmatist Thomas Playford led his Liberal and Country League to victory in 1938 South Australia with its predominantly rural-based economy was still suffering from economic distress, and the need to correct the State's over-dependence on the primary sector was well recognised, especially since South Australia had probably suffered more than other States with the collapse in world prices for primary products and also recorded the highest unemployment.<sup>100</sup> The unique circumstances of South Australia did not lend themselves to traditional liberal economic policies and Playford sought to promote industrialisation through 'strongly interventionist' methods. Indeed, so pronounced was his inclination in favour of government intervention that the Labor Opposition could claim in 1951 that Playford's policies had been 'more socialistic than Labor could ever hope to implement were it in office'.<sup>101</sup> He was the first Australian Premier to make 'the politics of development the politics of the State'.<sup>102</sup> Some of the bolder schemes, such as the nationalising of the Adelaide Electricity Supply Company and price and rent controls, drew opposition from within his own party, especially in the Legislative Council; it is even said that the Liberal leader in that chamber once referred to

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<sup>100</sup> Geoff Stokes & Rhonda Sharp, 'South Australia: governments and economic development', in Brian Head (ed.), *The Politics of Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>102</sup> Neal Blewett & Dean Jaensch, *Playford to Dunstan*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1971, p. 6.

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Playford as a ‘Bolshevik’.<sup>103</sup> Playford enjoyed amicable relations with Labor politicians,<sup>104</sup> and an amusing story is recounted by Stewart Cockburn about when Playford telephoned Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley after a Royal Commission recommended the South Australian Government acquire the Adelaide Electricity Supply Company.

‘Ben,’ he began, ‘I want to borrow £10m. from you’.

Chifley asked if the South Australian Premier had taken leave of his senses. That sort of money was just not available, he drawled in his well known gravelly tones.

‘Ben’, persisted Playford, ‘you don’t understand. I want to nationalise the Adelaide Electric Supply Company’.

There was a long-ish pause at the Canberra end of the line. Then Chifley responded:

‘Do you, Tom? Do you really? Well, that’s different. You get in touch with the Governor of the Commonwealth Bank. Tell him I said it’s all right. He’ll fix you up!’<sup>105</sup>

Under Playford’s long term of office, South Australia’s economy was significantly transformed from its narrow pre-war rural base as part of Playford’s plan for the creation of a low-cost structure for manufacturing in the State. A key factor in achieving this was his use of the South Australian Housing Trust as an economic instrument. Between 1939 and 1965 factory employment increased by 168 per cent.<sup>106</sup> The sector increasingly became the core of the economy, providing 73 jobs per 1,000 people at the beginning of his Premiership and 110 at the end.<sup>107</sup> While there remains much debate about the extent to which Playford and his policies can be credited with South Australia’s rapid

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<sup>103</sup> P. A. Howell, ‘Playford, Politics and Parliament’, in Bernard O’Neill, Judith Raftery & Kerrie Round (eds.) *Playford’s South Australia: Essays on the History of South Australia, 1933-1968*, Association of Professional Historians Inc., Adelaide, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>104</sup> Playford was an unabashed admirer of Chifley, and there is evidence to suggest that this was reciprocated. At a ‘Victory’ luncheon of the Port Adelaide Chamber of Commerce in 1945, Playford observed that it was fortunate that Australia has as Prime Minister a man who was prepared to make decentralisation more than a catch-phrase. (Quoted in Katharine West, *Power in the Liberal Party: A Study in Australian Politics*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1965, p. 64 fn). See also L. F. Crisp, *Ben Chifley*, Longmans, Green & Co, Melbourne, 1961, pp. 271-4.

<sup>105</sup> Stewart Cockburn, *Playford: Benevolent Despot*, Axiom, Adelaide, 1991, p. 114.

<sup>106</sup> Stokes & Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>107</sup> Cited in David C. Rich, ‘Tom’s Vision? Playford and Industrialisation’, in O’Neil, Raftery & Round, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

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development,<sup>108</sup> it is clearly evident that industrialisation was the defining feature of the Playford era.

Playford did not conceive of the notion of industrialisation, nor the strategy to achieve it. But, equally, there is no doubt that Playford was extraordinarily visionary and creative in the ways in which he took the idea of an industrialisation strategy, shaped, developed and implemented it, and then used all his political skills and guile, as well as the resources of the State administration, to ensure that it succeeded. In stark contrast with his conservative social policies, Playford's approach to industrialisation was forward-looking, sometimes radical and perennially pragmatic.<sup>109</sup>

It is widely recognised that some industrialisation would have come to South Australia whichever party was in power, as even a Playford admirer such as Walter Crocker concedes, but Crocker emphasises that it was Playford, by way of imagination and personal style 'who converted a vague notion and a faltering natural development into a dynamic complex reality'.<sup>110</sup>

The Playford era came to an end in South Australia in 1965, the first tangible sign that the tide was about to turn on the Liberal ascendancy. Ironically, his electoral demise can be attributed partly to the process of industrialisation he initiated which sparked urban expansion and allowed the ALP to win what were once safe rural Liberal seats.<sup>111</sup> Although Menzies was still in power in Canberra and Calwell still led the ALP, a new breed of Labor leader was beginning to emerge, and a youthful Don Dunstan, harbinger of things to come, became a Minister in the Walsh Labor Government that succeeded Playford. Things would not be quite the same again.

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<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Michael Stutchbury, 'The Playford Legend and the Industrialisation of South Australia to 1945', *Australian Economic History Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1-19; Michael Stutchbury, 'State Government Industrialisation Strategies', in Kyoko Sheridan (ed.) *The State as Developer: Public Enterprise in South Australia*, Royal Australian Institute of Public Administration, Adelaide, 1986, pp. 60-91; David C. Rich, 'Manufacturing in Adelaide: a long view', *Australian Journal of Regional Studies*, vol. 1, 1987; David C. Rich, 'Industrialisation and South Australia', *Australian Geographer*, vol. 19, May 1988; Tom Playford, *Free Enterprise Under Changing Economic Conditions* (William Queale Memorial Lecture, Adelaide, 1956).

<sup>109</sup> Rich, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>110</sup> Walter Crocker, *Sir Thomas Playford: A Portrait*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 39.

<sup>111</sup> Stokes & Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

## 2.6. A Liberal Australia

**THE FULL** flower of the Liberal ascendancy was to bloom in 1969 although, paradoxically, its imminent end was already in sight. In a political alignment that was as rare as it was fleeting, the Liberals found themselves in government everywhere at the Commonwealth and State level. Labor lost power in Tasmania in the election on May 10 — the first time since 1934 that a non-Labor administration had governed in that State. In South Australia, after the first Walsh-Dunstan interregnum that had seen the ALP govern from 1965-68, the Liberals were returned to office in 1968 with the support of an independent, and in Queensland the Liberals continued as the junior partner in the Country-Liberal coalition that had been in office since 1957. It was briefly a heady moment for the Liberal Party to savour in its 25th year of existence, but the success, while a vindication of Menzies and his vision, owed a good deal to circumstances, including Labor's internal troubles which kept it from office federally, in Queensland and, via the DLP vote, in Victoria. In Tasmania, the ALP had simply grown tired and was found wanting in several local issues,<sup>112</sup> while in South Australia the gerrymander from the Playford years enabled the Liberals to regain office when the Labor vote slumped to 51.97 per cent at the 1968 election.<sup>113</sup>

If the political map of the entire country was Liberal blue, it was late afternoon in the Liberal ascendancy rather than high noon. Federally, Labor had installed a dynamic new leader in Gough Whitlam who was reshaping the party in his pitch for a new constituency for Labor, especially after the record defeat inflicted on the ALP in 1966 when its vote fell below 40 per cent and the coalition commanded a majority of 40. Under Whitlam, with the Liberals led uncertainly by Gorton, Labor made heavy inroads into the vote in

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<sup>112</sup> See W. A. Townsley, *The Government of Tasmania*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976, p. 43.

1969, lifting its share to almost 47 per cent and taking 16 seats from the coalition.<sup>114</sup> The Liberal edifice, which so recently appeared impregnable, was crumbling, and by 1971 there were clear signs that the long post-war boom was nearing its end. In that year, unemployment reached its highest level since the credit squeeze of 1961 and the level of inflation in 1972 was the highest since the 1950s, all of which meant, in the words of one writer, that ‘the image of the Liberal Party as the provider of full employment, affluence and economic well-being was under question’.<sup>115</sup> The vote in New South Wales was falling in successive elections from the 1965 high, the Tasmanian episode was but a brief interlude, a redistribution in South Australia would ensure Labor’s return in 1970 and the tide was noticeably turning in Western Australia with the Liberal vote steadily declining from 1965 (48.02 per cent) through 1968 (43.15 per cent) to a disastrous 29.08 per cent in 1971 when the coalition lost office. Only in Victoria was the line held, but speculation was already rife as to when Henry Bolte would call it a day there and a new era would be ushered in.<sup>116</sup> Already, the type of coverage that Bolte was attracting in the more serious media was along the lines of a political dinosaur surviving into the jet age. A profile in the *Australian Financial Review* just months before his retirement noted that while ‘he is not old as politicians go, his weakness is that he still tends to reflect the values of the late 1950s, the first years of office. These were the halcyon years of economic growth, State competition, Liberals identifying with prosperity...’.<sup>117</sup>

There is no single explanation that can be offered about the Liberal decline, but some general observations can be made that have a degree of validity across the board. At the Federal level, the authority of the Liberal Party had clearly been weakened by the departure of Menzies and the death of Holt. In addition, growing organised opposition to both the war in Vietnam and the Government’s policy of conscription for 20-year-olds was highlighting nightly on the nation’s television screens the widening gap between a

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<sup>113</sup> Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government & Politics 1965-1974*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977, p. 118.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>115</sup> Dean Jaensch, *The Australian Party System*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, p. 41.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Rohan Rivett, ‘Sir Henry and Those Who Wait’, *Canberra Times*, 31 December 1972.

<sup>117</sup> *Australian Financial Review*, 5 May 1972.

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government noticeably growing old in office and a voting population whose age was rapidly falling as the 'baby boomers' enrolled. The sure-footedness of Menzies, both with his own party and with the electorate at large, was no more, nor was the suave affability of Holt. Gone was the earnest but anachronistic Calwell from the ALP leadership, and in his place was the intellectually gifted, articulate Whitlam who, up against first Gorton and later McMahon, was shown to be a superior performer. The age of television was being felt politically. Similarly, in South Australia, Don Dunstan was exemplifying in large measure the new-style Labor leader in striking fashion to an electorate even beyond his home State that was seemingly hungry for more; it would within a few years be emulated in New South Wales with the advent of Neville Wran, another urbane and articulate lawyer who was to revive Labor's fortunes in spectacular fashion in that State.

The development boom that had underpinned steady economic growth for much of the post-war period was showing no signs of slowing, but indications were emerging that the electorate was shifting from its hitherto unqualified support for development. Conservation was starting to become an issue, and the phrase 'quality of life' was starting to be heard more frequently. The development rhetoric that had so clearly articulated a public mood was now gathering opponents who wanted other considerations admitted to the equation. Nowhere was this demonstrated so clearly as in Perth where the Brand Government attracted criticism about 'arrogance' and 'high-handedness' over its handling of a number of seemingly minor local issues, most notably the controversy over Barracks Arch in 1966. In that year the demolition was begun of the century-old Pensioners' Barracks at the western end of St Georges Terrace to make room for the Mitchell freeway project. Amid a growing concern about preserving notable buildings, a Barracks Defence Council was set up and a compromise proposal emerged providing for the centre archway to be left standing or moved to an alternative site. The Government, meanwhile, commissioned a public opinion poll and then proceeded to ignore its findings (49 per cent for retaining the arch, 34 per cent for its demolition) by introducing a motion in the Legislative Assembly seeking approval for the demolition of the arch. A revolt by government members stymied the move, and at first Brand refused to commit the

Government to any restoration work, but by 1968 he had been forced to give ground and agree. The Government also found itself in trouble over proposals to fluoridate Perth's water supply, its attempts to ban the practice of the pseudo-religion, Scientology, and proposals, subsequently abandoned, to allow a private company to sink a railway under the city.<sup>118</sup>

In Victoria, the Left maintained its stranglehold on the ALP, and the Liberals were not seriously threatened at the polls. But at the same time there was a discernible shift in the social climate. Conservation issues were prominent among the many new issues confronting the Bolte Government, and plans to build a restaurant in Melbourne's Botanic Gardens<sup>119</sup> as well as proposals to open up marginal land in western Victoria, known as the Little Desert, for farming,<sup>120</sup> attracted criticism from many sources, especially conservationists.

The times indeed were a-changing, as the Bob Dylan protest song put it. The issue of the Little Desert was indicative of this; it was a decisive shift in the political climate that went beyond the single issue of conservation: it was a signal that 'many voters were concerned about the moral poverty of the expanding materialist society'.<sup>121</sup> The Save Our Bushlands Action Committee organised two major public meetings in Melbourne in the second half of 1969 which were sympathetically reported. It also sponsored a deputation to the Premier, but he declined to intervene, re-starting his belief that ministers should be allowed autonomy to make their own decisions. Moreover, Bolte himself was sympathetic to the settlement scheme. The Lands and Conservation Minister, Sir William McDonald, was increasingly the butt of cartoonists' satire, and Libby Robin detected in the campaign a radical shift from the pro-development ethos that had hitherto

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<sup>118</sup> Black, 'Liberals Triumphant', *op. cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>119</sup> Blazey, *op.cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 172-5.

<sup>121</sup> Libby Robin, *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1998, p. 18.

prevailed: the ‘hero developer’ image was no longer fashionable; ‘hero developers’ had fallen from grace.<sup>122</sup>

A parliamentary inquiry was foisted on the Government by the combined vote of the Labor and Country parties in the Legislative Council, and the longer it ran the more opposition mounted. A by-election setback for the Government followed by the blocking of the scheme’s funding by the Council sent a powerful message that was not lost on Bolte who ‘discovered’ a more electorally appealing conservation policy in time for the 1970 election at which he was returned but without McDonald who lost his seat of Dundas which he had held for 15 years.<sup>123</sup>

But the most serious controversy for the Bolte Government was the decision to hang Ronald Ryan, the convicted murderer of a prison officer. Ryan, who went to the gallows in 1967, was the last person to be executed in Australia; and while the Bolte Government’s vote in the State election that year fell only marginally from its 1964 level, it opened up a major chasm in the thinking between the Government and a very large section of the electorate, some of it hitherto politically sympathetic. What were rock solid convictions in Henry Bolte’s personal make-up were now openly challenged by many people. His biographer Peter Blazey wrote of the impact this had on Bolte, subtly indicating a sclerotic quality, common to much of the Liberal Party, that was soon to end the Liberal ascendancy through an inability to adapt.

The Ryan hanging affected Bolte much more deeply than he ever admitted. Politically, he had alienated people he respected. He was surprised at the genuine revulsion to the hanging by conservative allies. His ethic of punishment never changed, not his conviction he had done the right thing, and he seemed to suffer no remorse.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.* pp. 19-22.

<sup>124</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.* p. 158.

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The unchanging world governed by notions of virtue and sin that had shaped Henry Bolte all his 60 years came into sharp conflict with changing public attitudes highlighted by the Ryan case. There is little doubt that the execution of Ryan was a fundamental imperative for Bolte, and he signalled as much to influential media figures even before Cabinet met formally to consider the issue. It represented the first time that the major media would oppose him so comprehensively.<sup>125</sup>

It was, in a public sense, a most sensitive issue and Bolte found himself unable to respond in any way other than the time-honoured 'boots and all' approach that had served him so well. This was well, if crudely, illustrated in Bolte's own account of his daily press conference that took place that day.

The morning after the hanging, a gallery of about 50 turned up for my press conference at Parliament House. One bird (female reporter) asked me: 'What were you doing at 8 o'clock this morning?'

I replied: 'One of the three Ss I suppose'. She asked me what I meant by that and I said: 'A shit, a shave, or a shower'.<sup>126</sup>

Similarly in New South Wales the Askin Government that had come in so triumphantly in 1965 heaping scorn on a tired, decrepit Labor administration and promising a whirlwind of action and change had itself grown weary and insensitive<sup>127</sup> by the early 1970s. By 1973, at the time of Askin's final electoral hurrah, the gloss had well and truly worn off, and the Government looked 'run-down, inactive, tainted with scandal and

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<sup>125</sup> Mike Richards, *The Hanged Man: The Life and Death of Ronald Ryan*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 255-6.

<sup>126</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-8.

<sup>127</sup> A story that is often recounted to demonstrate Askin's insensitivity was his remark to a police officer who had informed him that demonstrators were laying down and blocking the road of the motorcade carrying him and the visiting United President, Lyndon Johnson. When told, Askin replied: 'Ride over the bastards'. His remark was not reported until some time after when Askin was overheard by a journalist while telling the story. Askin always said that the remark was a jocular one. When it was reported an avalanche of mail was received at the Premier's office which, according to Askin, ran four to one in support. Nevertheless, it did delineate a certain style that was typically Askin, and as his popularity waned it tended to mark him as insensitive and anachronistic. (See Askin interview, 1:2/28-30 for his own account).

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unresponsive to new issues of increasing concern to the electorate'.<sup>128</sup> The Government, for example, found it difficult to formulate an adequate response to a combination of union militancy and environmental concern as expressed by the Builders' Labourers Federation which imposed 'green bans' on a number of development projects, leading to press comment that it had been 'unable to assert its authority, leaving the BLF to make development policy by default'.<sup>129</sup>

The insecurities of the immediate post-war era had receded by the late 1960s, and the reassuring rhetoric of the generation of '49 no longer resonated with a generation unscathed by personal experience of depression, war and rationing. The assumptions that had underpinned a broad consensus through the 1950s and into the 1960s — fear of communism, political subversion at home and in the region, the need to develop resources, the housing crisis — were disintegrating under the weight of contemporary pressures that increasingly questioned authority and took prosperity and security for granted. The Labor Party, too, had changed. The class rhetoric was fading as new, educated leaders like Whitlam and Dunstan spoke a language and presented an image that was at once relevant, modern and dynamic.

By 1972, the edifice that Menzies had built was tottering, and in the wake of Whitlam's success in the election at the end of that year, ending 23 unbroken years of coalition rule, it was clear that the party had to rethink its relevance, especially as new voices emerged, such as the Australia Party<sup>130</sup>, comprising mostly disaffected former Liberals.. It also had to address — certainly at the national level, and also to a lesser extent at State level —

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<sup>128</sup> David Clune & Ken Turner, 'The 1973 Election' in Michael Hogan & David Clune, *The People's Choice*, Vol. 3, Parliament of New South Wales, Sydney, 2001, p. 108.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>130</sup> This minor party had its origins in a letter written to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by a businessman, Gordon Barton, opposing the Vietnam War. A show of spontaneous support prompted Barton to found the Liberal Reform Movement which ran candidates at the 1966 Federal election. Later it became the Australian Reform Movement and later still the Australia Party. (See entry in Dean Jaensch & Max Teichmann, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Australian Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1979, pp. 17-18.)

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the leadership issue which, in one of the most incisive post-mortems on the 1972 loss, was seen as crucial.

Failure of leadership within the party produces many of those conditions which did the Liberal Party so much harm in the year preceding the campaign itself: ministers contradicting each other, and even arguing with the prime minister, in public; policies seemingly decided on an ad hoc basis and not according to any long-term – or even medium-term – plan; backbenchers threatening to vote against the government or to abandon the prime minister on the floor of the House; factions forming; weakening morale in the organisation and among rank and file supporters, and so on.<sup>131</sup>

The diminishing hold of the Liberals on the electorate was clearly apparent by the late 1960s as the party started to lose relevance on a whole range of emerging issues; co-terminous with this slide — and arguably one of its causes — was a failure of leadership. The Liberal ascendancy was characterised by strong leadership, and with strong leadership there ensued party unity. But that leadership — most notably in the case of Menzies — remained too long in power. The overstay not only failed to appreciate the nature of crucial changes taking place in the electorate, it also failed to encourage new leaders who might be expected to be more in tune with contemporary society. The men who immediately followed Menzies — Holt, Gorton and McMahon while younger were of the same political generation and outlook; indeed, a key member of the Menzies Government and unsuccessful contender for the leadership after Holt died, Paul Hasluck, observed a diminution of leadership when he wrote: ‘The descent of the party is marked by the succession of leaders downhill from Menzies to Holt to Gorton to McMahon to Snedden’.<sup>132</sup> The same may be said of those who followed Askin in New South Wales — Lewis and Willis. Charles Court, who succeeded David Brand in Western Australia, at least managed to breathe new life into a returned Liberal-led government in 1974, but his increasingly authoritarian response to problems, such as industrial trouble and opposition by conservationists to development was out of step with the times and provoked rising discontent in his own party ranks.<sup>133</sup> Steele Hall who succeeded Tom Playford in South

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<sup>131</sup> David Kemp, ‘A Leader and a Philosophy’, in Henry Mayer (ed.) *Labor to Power: Australia’s 1972 Election*, Angus & Robertson, 1973, p. 50.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text, Melbourne, 1997, p. 217.

<sup>133</sup> David Black, ‘Liberals Triumphant’, *op. cit.*, pp. 469-70.

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Australia, was overwhelmed by events, lost control of his own party<sup>134</sup> and eventually left it, for a time, for the breakaway Liberal Movement. Only in Victoria was a genuinely successful generational shift built in to the succession with Bolte's anointment of Rupert Hamer.<sup>135</sup> Although Hamer was to encounter many problems, some of his own making, the Liberals remained in power for a full decade after Bolte's retirement — the final, flickering ember of the once-glorious ascendancy that had dominated Australian political life for a generation.

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<sup>134</sup> See Dean Jaensch & Joan Bullock, *Liberals in Limbo: Non-Labor Politics in South Australia 1970-1978*, Drummond, Richmond, 1978, *passim*, but esp. pp. 1-5.

<sup>135</sup> Rupert James Hamer (1916-2004) MLC East Yarra 1958-71, MLA Kew 1971-81, Minister for Immigration 1962-64, Minister for Local Government 1964-71, Chief Secretary, Deputy Premier 1971-72, Treasurer, Minister of the Arts 1972-79, Premier 1972-81.

### 3. BOLTE: VICTORIA'S LIBERAL PHOENIX

3.1 From Harry to Henry

3.2 Billy from the Bush

3.3 The Deputy Leader and the Liberals' Civil War

3.4 Leader by Accident

3.5 The Premier: 'Get to Know the People'

3.6 Government the Bolte Way

3.7 Bolte and the Liberal Party

3.8 The Public Perception

3.9 The Bolte Legacy

### 3.1. From Harry to Henry

**THE RELATIVE** ease with which Henry Bolte entered Parliament at his second attempt, became a Minister within 13 months, deputy leader after four years, party leader after six and Premier after eight, bespeaks a certain amount of luck; it also demonstrates a quite remarkable meritocracy and social fluidity in that a plain country-bred man without wealth or background nor even conspicuous achievement, yet with smart connections, could achieve so much in so short a time. The ‘smart connections’ themselves are significant — forged as they were in the ubiquitous arena of that great Australian leveller, sport, and reinforced by country social life. He numbered among his close friends, met through cricket and football, the scions of prominent rural families, men such as Chester (‘Chetty’) Manifold,<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Street,<sup>2</sup> Dan McKinnon,<sup>3</sup> and Rutherford (‘Ford’) Guthrie,<sup>4</sup> all of whom were older and ‘who’d had a better start in life than ever I’d had, they’d all gone to Geelong Grammars or Melbourne Grammars or to Oxford, Cambridge, in the main...but in mixing with them you never felt as though you weren’t their equal’.<sup>5</sup> Rubbing shoulders with men of privilege and wealth had a role in shaping the youthful Bolte’s political and social outlook, helping him ‘not to be all that conservative, but at least to accept the fact that one could walk in any circle, hold your head up, and just as long as you remained...a gentleman...you could mix with anyone’.<sup>6</sup> While his family voted non-Labor, and his youthful companions were closely identified with non-Labor politics, Bolte at his first vote, in 1929, voted Labor for the first and only time. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Chester Manifold (1897-1979), grazier; MLA Hampden 1929-35, Minister without portfolio 1932-33; father MHR Corangamite 1901-03, 1913-18; chairman Victoria Racing Club 1951-62.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Street (1894-1940), grazier; MHR Corangamite 1943-40, Minister for Defence 1938-40.

<sup>3</sup> Ewen Daniel McKinnon (1903-1983 ) MHR Wannon 1949-51, Corangamite 1953-66; later Ambassador to Argentina.

<sup>4</sup> Rutherford Guthrie (1899-1990), grazier; MLA Ripon 1947-1950, Minister of Lands and Soldier Settlement 1948-50; president Victorian Division Liberal Party of Australia 1956-60.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sir Henry Bolte, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, Mel Pratt Collection, Oral TRC 121/73, 1:1/2.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/2.

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Because ‘like all younger people I had a mind of my own...’<sup>7</sup> The family background, however, was staunchly conservative, and Bolte’s grandfather, who was in many ways a mentor, greatly admired the Nationalist Prime Minister of the 1920s, S. M. Bruce.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he was to concede that a process of political osmosis may have been at work. He would later in life tell an interviewer: ‘Probably my association with people like that started me on my way to a political career. I think you can get a grounding in things unconsciously’.<sup>9</sup>

The social strata and their corresponding political expression were not lost on the young Bolte. In that part of Victoria, to the ALP faithful the name of Scullin<sup>10</sup> was revered and Bolte remembers how he was ‘a god in that area of Labor’.<sup>11</sup> The clannish Irish descendants clung to the Labor Party because their ‘father, mother and grandfather’ did, drawing on the experience of the great potato famine in Ireland. This collective identification gave rise to anger.

Now they were good people, but they were very bitter against – not ownership, because they all owned something, they were bitter against what they thought was the oppressor. And the oppressor to them, as it would have been in Ireland, would have been the landlord, would have been the government, would have been people in authority.<sup>12</sup>

This, Bolte soon came to realise, shaped their political views and was apparent to even a non-political youth who rubbed shoulders with many people; it was Labor tribalism, as seemingly immutable in its beliefs as it was impervious to political argument.

If anything, his association with young men of privilege served to fire his determination to succeed. He was to reflect years later that ‘it was built into me, somehow, to try harder against the ‘silvertails’.<sup>13</sup> Bolte had also seen young men about him succeed

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/2.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Melbourne (later Viscount) Bruce (1883-1967) MHR Flinders 1918-29, 1931-33; Prime Minister 1922-29; later High Commissioner to London.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sun*, 7 June 1958.

<sup>10</sup> James Henry Scullin (1876-1953), MHR Corangamite 1910-13, Yarra 1922-49; Prime Minister 1929-31.

<sup>11</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/4.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/4.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Prior, *Bolte by Bolte*, Crafftman, Melbourne, 1990, p. 13.

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without natural advantage like wealth and family influence. Although Church of England by denomination, Bolte was associated with the Presbyterian church as well, mainly because of its more youthful congregation, and he joined a quasi-Masonic group called the Order of the Burning Bush.

And that to me was one of the best things I ever did in my life. There would be up to 25 or 30 boys. Every one of them made a success of his life, that I can assure you, no matter whether he went on to a station to work or join the army during the war. You'd see some of them become colonels and brigadiers and majors, and I'm not talking of the ones that had the silver spoon either, the fellows that had to do it the hard way.<sup>14</sup>

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The early years of Henry Bolte indicated little of what lay ahead. A restless young man whose mother had arranged for him to sit an entry examination for work in a bank — an exam he passed but the job he declined<sup>15</sup> — Bolte tried his hand at a range of work, including shearing and as a 'picker-upper' in the shearing sheds.<sup>16</sup> Then his mother had the idea of setting him up in business, opening a draper's shop. In March 1925 the following advertisement appeared in the *Skipton Standard and Streatham Gazette*.

Mrs A. Bolte announces that she has opened an up-to-date soft-goods business in the main street (next to the garage). The building is of the latest design and will carry a large range of men's and boys' mercery, ladies' wear, boots and shoes. The terms are cash and the goods, which are of the highest quality, will be sold at lowest prices. The public are invited to call and inspect.<sup>17</sup>

The business struggled on for four years, but was not successful. It was just not suited to Henry Bolte.

Well, you might as well have put a bull in a china shop, I was useless in it. Again in a country town you'd be dreaming there for an hour or two before you saw a customer. I suppose it could have been made to knock out a meagre existence or even better than wages perhaps, but it wasn't for me.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/10.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/7

<sup>16</sup> Peter Blazey, *Bolte: A Political Biography*, Mandarin, Port Melbourne, 1990, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

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He simply did not like to be constrained. One of the reasons he was to give many years later for not accepting a position with the bank was that ‘...it would be like a prison...Probably I felt...it was going to stop my sporting activities and that could have well been the case. I couldn’t go duck shooting when I wanted’.<sup>19</sup> On his own admission, he was as a young man ‘absolutely ratty’<sup>20</sup> about sport, and many years later he was remembered in Skipton as ‘a good cricketer and footballer — in a winning side. But he didn’t like work. He’d spend his time hunting ducks, in and out of season’.<sup>21</sup>

But even as the young man searched for his niche, he did not touch the world lightly. He was deeply enmeshed in the life of Skipton, heavily involved in the racing club, the church, the cricket club and the football club, and in most instances he was either secretary or president.<sup>22</sup> It was in this milieu, engaged and involved as he was, that he undoubtedly came to know about people and their concerns; it was even if he was unaware at the time, a political training ground *par excellence*. In 1934, as he prepared to leave Skipton, the local paper reported on a party given in his honour.

An active participant in all sporting movements, including football, cricket, golf and racing, as well as having associations with the Church of England and Presbyterian churches, Henry Bolte has proved himself quite a cosmopolitan young man during his residence at Skipton. He has always been ready to assist any movement for the benefit for the community.<sup>23</sup>

By the time of the Depression, his family had given him enough money to buy a small farm at Bamganie near Meredith, some 80 kilometres from Skipton, and he supplemented his earnings by trapping and shooting rabbits; in shearing season, he would be working in the sheds. Working as what he called a ‘hey you’, he was required to join the Australian

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<sup>18</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/8.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/7-8.

<sup>20</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Melbourne Observer*, 8 October, 1972.

<sup>22</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1:10.

<sup>23</sup> Blazey, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

Workers' Union,<sup>24</sup> and Bolte's first appearance on the electoral roll, in the subdivision of Warrenheip, noted his occupation as 'labourer' — an entry not amended until 1956, by which time he had been a Member of Parliament for nine years and Premier for one; later entries described him as 'farmer'.<sup>25</sup>

His acquisition of the rundown sheep property, 'Kialla', which would be his home for the rest of his life, also enabled him to marry the young woman, two years his senior, whom he had courted for several years, Edith Lillian Elder, known to all as 'Jill' and who would become Bolte's indispensable political partner. Yet he had not exactly become part of the landed gentry. Far from it. Kialla was described by a neighbour as 'terrible country, just stumps, logs and rabbit burrows'.<sup>26</sup>

Even after the war, some 13 years after he had taken over Kialla and was a newly-elected Member of Parliament, it was anything but a showcase property, nor were the accoutrements state of the art. There was an air of 'can do' about the place, as a visitor, a fellow politician, recalls, recounting his amazement at seeing a whole hillside moving — infested with rabbits.

My wife and I went to stay at Henry's property several times, and he had just bought a Ford ute from army disposals. It had no cap on the petrol tank, just half a tennis ball, and he had to blow into the tank to get the car started.<sup>27</sup>

At Meredith, he simply picked up where he had left off in Skipton, throwing himself enthusiastically into the life of the community, joining its cricket and football teams, becoming a member of the church vestry, and joining the volunteer fire brigade. It did him no harm politically, especially as the State seat of Hampden straddled both towns. His intimate knowledge of the area, his contacts and his stature ('even if it is only in the

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<sup>24</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Melbourne Observer*, 8 October 1972.

<sup>26</sup> Bob Molesworth quoted in Prior, *op.cit.*, p.21.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with the Hon. John Don, Melbourne, 26 July 2002.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

sporting and social fields'<sup>28</sup>) were to his eventual advantage. But the main task at hand in 1934 was the farm, and the two put in long hours of 'hard work, bloody hard work', not to mention some innovation.

I led the way in this district sowing rye and clover, planting 14,000 trees as wind breaks and fixing up the waterways. I made a bad farm a good farm, and it is fair to say that my success as a farmer had a lot to do with my credibility as a politician. Certainly it did as far as the country vote was concerned.<sup>29</sup>

Intervening, however, between farming and politics was the war. Bolte tried to enlist on several occasions but was rejected on medical grounds (he had flat feet), eventually being accepted as a Class Two, which meant he was not eligible to serve outside Australia. Bolte was posted to Puckapunyal army camp, north of Melbourne, achieving the rank of lance bombardier<sup>30</sup> and becoming a gunnery instructor, but his main job was in the pay office. His shrewd country eyes drew a number of lessons, about human nature and organisational process, that were to remain with him. He later recalled how some tanks had crashed through fences while on manoeuvres and a major had come along asking if any of the soldiers knew anything about repairing fencing.

I said I did. The major asked me if I had ever done a 'school' on fencing. I said no, I'd just fixed fences. He said, 'You're no bloody good then', and that was the end of that. I'd probably seen and repaired more bloody fences than anyone else in camp, but I was no good because I hadn't done a school on fencing.<sup>31</sup>

It was an attitude that was to characterise Bolte's political leadership — practicality. He was never one to be moved by theory or abstruse argument as many a public servant, and no doubt a colleague or two, were to discover. His experience as a plain countryman who had rubbed shoulders with the gentry left him in no awe of the officer class. An example of this was when one morning it was his job to take a detachment to the Regimental Aid Post, and on the way he encountered the Colonel, 'a gruff, old army type', and saluted.

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<sup>28</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/11.

<sup>29</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Bolte claimed he had been a sergeant but the World War II Nominal Roll held at the Australian War Memorial records Henry Edward Bolte (V5444) as having been discharged with the rank of Lance Bombardier. He may well have been at times an acting sergeant.

<sup>31</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

The salute was not returned. Later that day he had to take the regiment down to the parade ground, and on arrival the Colonel was there and saluted.

I didn't! He called me over and started to tick me off. 'I said: 'I recognised you this morning, sir, and you didn't return the salute. I thought that for some reason that was to be the procedure today'.

I could have been court-martialled, I suppose, but it wasn't rebellion. I simply thought that, if the Colonel was the leader, he should be the leader all the time, not just when he was on parade in full uniform, but also when I was taking a few stragglers down to the RAP. I hoped it would be a bloody good lesson for him.<sup>32</sup>

This was how he approached political leadership: he was the leader all the time, the leader from the front, the leader who set an example. Bolte had long seen himself at centre stage, as a doer rather than a watcher, as a leader rather than a follower. It was characteristic of his thought that many years before when his mother has inquired of his interests he had replied a parson, a politician or an auctioneer<sup>33</sup> — each calling, interestingly, one that commanded a crowd. Although not naturally given to reflection, Bolte came to realise that there were those who served and there were those who led. Even as a lowly NCO he knew in what camp he belonged.

I was all right as a gunner. I was promoted to lance corporal when I'd been there only a week, so I was never a mess orderly. I was never a teller in Parliament either. The teller is the one who counts the votes in divisions. Once you're a Minister, you never have to be a teller, and I became a Minister after only 10 or 11 months [13 actually]. Next I was Deputy Leader of the Opposition, then Leader, then Premier, and they are never appointed as tellers. It's not a bad double actually, me not being either a mess orderly in the army or a teller in parliament...<sup>34</sup>

It was to remain a matter of deep regret that he had not served overseas, later recalling his Puckapunyal days as 'a damned waste of time, really'.<sup>35</sup> Yet in the greater scheme of things it actually conferred an advantage when he entered the political fray that otherwise might not have existed. His friend, Alastair McIntyre, who sailed as a major, was also interested in politics, and Bolte urged him to stand for Hampden in the 1945 elections. But McIntyre had only just returned to Australia and felt he had not had sufficient time to

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/13.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

settle down, and decided not to offer himself for endorsement. Other names, too, had been mentioned, but the situation was complicated by political turmoil at the time in 1945 — largely as the result of ongoing friction between the new Liberal Party (successor to the UAP) and the Country Party. Matters came to a head when a group of Liberal rebels led by the Attorney-General, Ian Macfarlan, defied the party and obtained a commission from the Governor to form a caretaker government pending an election. One of Macfarlan's key supporters was Ron Cumming,<sup>36</sup> Member for Hampden since 1935, an old Geelong Grammarian and friends with the Manifolds, the Guthries and other prominent landed families. The Liberals needed an official candidate to oppose Cumming, but there was great reluctance on account of social connections. Enter Henry Edward Bolte, a man without such trifling qualms.

Well I was never endorsed, this is the extraordinary part of the whole shooting match. The nominations were to close on the Monday. By the Saturday — and I may mention that several of us were looking for candidates and it was at that stage that I had approached Alastair McIntyre and he'd refused, and others had contacted other people. In fact I know jolly well that Chetty Manifold and others contacted Dan Mackinnon, who later became the [Federal] Member for Wannon and Corangamite. But this was where it was difficult for any of these fellows and there could have been dozens of candidates, or should have been, but they were all friends of Ronald Cumming. All lived in that social circle and not one would oppose him. Well, I wasn't to know all this, really; I'm living at the tail end of the electorate away from all this fun and games that are going on, and the Saturday evening, when Bill Scott and Clyde Fiskien said to me, 'Well, why not be the candidate yourself?' I said 'I've got a damned good mind to', and they said, 'Well, you are the candidate.' And it was as simple as that, in a pub — it was done in the Buninyong Hotel.<sup>37</sup>

Bolte's drinking companions that night, both notable graziers, carried some considerable clout between them, Scott being a longtime UAP activist and Clyde Fiskien<sup>38</sup> formerly MHR for Ballaarat. One of the men was later to recall that he had approved of Bolte for two reasons — first, because he had made a success of his property, and secondly, he had a wife who was a good mixer.<sup>39</sup> It was a confused election campaign with the Liberal

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<sup>36</sup> William Ronald Cumming (1886-1951), grazier; MLA Hampden 1935-45, Minister for Agriculture, 1945.

<sup>37</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/14.

<sup>38</sup> Archibald Clyde Wanless Fiskien (1897-1970), grazier of Lal Lal, MHR Ballaarat 1934-37.

<sup>39</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

rebels running as ‘Ministerial Liberals’, and Bolte later recalled it as ‘a hopeless, impossible election’.<sup>40</sup> For a time he regretted his impetuosity in standing, not fully realising the dimensions of the damaging internal brawl within the Liberal Party.

You’d have a husband fighting with his wife, the husband saying ‘I’m supporting Ronald Cumming’ and the wife saying ‘Not on your Nellie, I won’t have a bar of him, he’s ratted on the party.’ This was so strong, and it was very strong from, say Lismore to Camperdown, round Terang and all in that area of the old Western District.<sup>41</sup>

It was anything but an impressive debut from the hopeful candidate, driving around the electorate in his battered and unreliable utility, never knowing if he was going to reach his destination. His meetings were poorly attended, and by all accounts he made a poor impression, fumbling, sweating and faltering in his campaign speeches. He was to lose, albeit narrowly, to the Labor candidate, Ray Hyatt,<sup>42</sup> by a margin of 600 votes.

Bolte might easily have become a forgotten man politically. Indeed, what little press coverage there was in Melbourne of Hampden, noted that there were two sitting members contesting the seat (Hyatt’s seat of Warrenheip and Grenville having been abolished) along with the Country Party candidate, McLennan, and noting only that ‘there’s also a fourth candidate’.<sup>43</sup> Bolte was by no means assured of another run at the seat and there were moves to depose him; characteristically he fought back, notably in seeking out an elocution teacher, and consciously trying to improve his presentation style, practising on Jill.<sup>44</sup> He was determined to have another crack at parliament but to do that he had to contend with four other hopefuls lining up for pre-selection. Despite his elocution lessons, he again failed to impress when he addressed the Liberal panel at Cressy, and one Liberal politician there described him as the least impressive of the five.

Bolte was nervous, edgy, and couldn’t put two words together. One had the impression of honest endeavour, but there was a complete lack of continuity in anything he said. Everyone at the convention thought, ‘Here’s a bloke who’s going through hell.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/14.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/15.

<sup>42</sup> John Allison Raymond Hyatt (1893-1969), MLA Warrenheip and Grenville 1943-45, Hampden 1945-47.

<sup>43</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/17.

<sup>44</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 29; Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

Not all observers were so dismissive. An organiser for the Liberal Party working in the electorate saw it otherwise, reporting as he did in a meeting at Camperdown: ‘Mr Bolte the candidate addressed the meeting and made an excellent impression’.<sup>46</sup>

Bolte had prepared the ground well and when the ballots were counted he had scored a decisive victory, winning with about 140 of the 160 votes, according to his own recollection.<sup>47</sup> It might easily have been otherwise, and it says much about Bolte’s standing in the community that he was able to prevail, and prevail so convincingly. Like in anything he joined, he took a lead role, becoming in 1945 president of the newly-formed Meredith branch of the Liberal Party. There were keen young men about, men hungry for action after demobilisation and the new Liberal Party was attracting them in droves. Many of them were from the ‘officer class’ to which the Liberals pitched an appeal for recruits; many had served overseas, had attained high rank and were ‘plausible, well-educated and often wealthy’.<sup>48</sup> Quite conspicuously, Bolte lacked the social background, wealth or wartime rank to vie with them, but by this time he had other advantages.

By his late thirties, Bolte was a popular, gregarious farmer who had made his run-down farm successful – an achievement highly respected in the country. This, and his wide sporting activities, had made him one of those men who emerge in rural life as a leader of the district.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from W. Russell to Secretary, Liberal Party 17 July 1947, UMA 6/1/1/3.

<sup>47</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/18.

<sup>48</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

Bolte had no shortage of willing and also influential helpers. In August 1947 a Liberal field worker was reporting how he had arranged for Bolte to spend a day with the Liberal Federal Member, Allan McDonald<sup>50</sup> ‘in order that the former will be given all the necessary information regarding Mr McDonald’s policy’. He outlined plans to visit Skipton and Derrinallum with the candidate, but it seems Bolte was using the time to ‘yarn’ with the locals and talk about the political situation generally rather than policy specifics because, in the same report, he adds: ‘I will be glad if I can be supplied with Liberal Party’s country policy as soon as possible’.<sup>51</sup> Henry Bolte (or ‘Harry’ Bolte<sup>52</sup> as he then presented himself, apparently preferring the more serious ‘Henry’ after he was elected) was busily selling himself.

Bolte ran an energetic campaign, becoming ubiquitous in the electorate and meeting as many people in as many situations as he could. It was an authentically local figure hitting the campaign trail, not some spruced-up slicker. In fact he looked so little like a smooth would-be politician that, as he arrived at one house in his battered ute, one resident took him for the bottle-o.<sup>53</sup> By the beginning of October, a feeling of optimism had infused the campaign, though not without some concerns.

Regarding Hampden - Mr Bolte is making a good impression and is working already to keep himself before the electors. It is very important that he meet as many wellwishers as possible informally. The selection of a Country Party candidate is going to complicate matters.<sup>54</sup>

The Liberals were clearly throwing considerable resources into the campaign, bringing in several luminaries to assist. These included Allan McDonald MHR, Wilfrid Kent

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<sup>50</sup> Allan McKenzie McDonald (1888-1953) MLA Polwarth 1933-1940; MHR Corangamite 1940-53, Minister for External Territories 1941.

<sup>51</sup> Russell to Secretary, Liberal Party, 12 August, 1947.

<sup>52</sup> From Hampden election campaign material, ‘Electorate Reports, 1947-52’, UMA 6/1/1/3.)

<sup>53</sup> *Sun*, 12 July 1972.

<sup>54</sup> Russell to Secretary, 1 October 1947.

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Hughes MLA,<sup>55</sup> Gordon McArthur MLC,<sup>56</sup> Dan Mackinnon MHR, and the formidable R. G. Casey whose radio speech was broadcast to the electorate from Camperdown.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Wilfrid Selwyn Kent Hughes (1895-1970) MLA Kew 1927-49, Minister of Sustenance 1932-33, Minister without Portfolio 1932-34, Minister of Railways 1934, Minister of Labour 1934-35, Deputy Premier 1935 and 1948-49, Minister of Transport 1934-35 and 1947-49, Minister of Public instruction 1947-48, Minister of Electrical Undertakings 1948-49, Chief Secretary 1948; MHR Chisholm 1949-70, Minister for Interior 1951-56, Minister for Works and Housing 1951-52, Minister for Works 1952-56.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon Stewart McArthur (1896-1965) MLC 1931-1965, Minister without Portfolio 1955-56, Minister of Forests, State Development and Decentralisation 1956-58, President Legislative Council 1958-65.

<sup>57</sup> Report on Election Campaign, Hampden, UMA 6/1/1/3.

### 3.2. Billy from the Bush

**FEW PEOPLE** paid any attention to the influx of newcomers who trickled into the magnificent edifice in Spring Street that had for the first 26 years of the Federation housed the Commonwealth Parliament. Henry Bolte, aged 39, was simply one of many. If he had nurtured a burning ambition it did not show: his arrival marked the first time he had ever been to Parliament House. In fact, the very first problem that occurred was his indecision whether to go in up the imposing front steps or by some less obvious back entrance. Strangely out of place in the city and confused by the new surroundings, the tyro MLA for Hampden was awed; he remembered feeling ‘very much out of my depth...Going in for the first time in the party meeting, the first time in the House, eventually endeavouring to make a maiden speech’.<sup>58</sup> He was, he admitted, ‘scared of his own shadow’.<sup>59</sup>

He cut a rough-hewn figure in the city, and was dubbed by journalists ‘Billy from the Bush’.<sup>60</sup> It worried him that people appeared quick to assume that he was a Country Party member — ‘one of the greatest insults I could get’.<sup>61</sup> He did not even know what a member was paid. A political veteran, Sir George Knox<sup>62</sup> took the younger man in hand, showing him around and giving some general advice, such as what clothes the new member needed — ‘short black coat, striped pants, and so on’.<sup>63</sup> Although a newcomer and feeling uncertain, he was not reticent in pushing his views, a veteran reporter remembering him as ‘...very brash and very talkative...often talked about his pet financial schemes...everyone treated him as a fool: as a sort of garrulous no-hoper’.<sup>64</sup> It was, to be sure, a most premature judgement. While the newcomer lacked finesse and

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<sup>58</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/20.

<sup>59</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/6.

<sup>62</sup> George Hodges Knox (1885-1960) MLA Upper Yarra 1927-45, Scoresby 1945-60; Minister without Portfolio 1929-35, Speaker 1942-47.

<sup>63</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

his political skills were still being learned, he well knew the importance of the mood of the people.

I learned politics as I went along. I'll admit I didn't have much idea before I got in, except that I had resolved to try to improve things. That was the era immediately after the war and people were tired of being regimented and governed by regulations. They were sick of restraints, of being told what to do and where to go, and the loss of choice, of personal freedom. A man who came out of that era knew what he was in Parliament for, all right. He had purpose; he wanted to do things.<sup>65</sup>

There was always an impetuous side to Bolte, but rather than detract from his effectiveness it often worked to enhance it. Such was the case of his quite unrehearsed maiden speech, delivered on 17 December 1947. It had been a hot, windy day, and in a dry summer in Victoria that often means bushfires. So with a canny eye on his rural electorate, he sallied forth, mentioning in passing that he was president of the Meredith brigade, and that brigades really had insufficient power to effectively work in fire control and prevention. It might have remained folksy and local, but Bolte moved to a wider scenario, deftly playing on the summer fears of Victorians.

I represent the electorate of Hampden, a large proportion of which in 1944 was burned out. Unless honourable members have experienced what it means to be burned out by a fierce bush fire, I am certain they cannot understand the troubles and trials of the people who are the victims. This year is a record growth of grass, and I maintain that it can be a record for fires unless something is done quickly. Inside three weeks the whole country will be in a condition to burn, and when I say 'burn' I mean it. The fire would start in the Grampians and end at the coast. I ask the Chief Secretary to give the rural fire brigades as soon as possible the authority they so badly need.<sup>66</sup>

It was a good line and the press picked it up.<sup>67</sup> It was a matter of timing and luck, but it began what was to become a long and fruitful relationship, not always happy, between Henry Bolte and the press. Bolte's seizing of the moment says much about his sense of opportunity, his feel for the public and what was to become a trademark streak of populism.

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<sup>65</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>66</sup> *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 17 December 1947, Vol 226, p. 431.

<sup>67</sup> *Argus* 18 December 1947.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

I did that just on the spur of the moment one night. I'd been there three months probably, all of a sudden something came up about the Country Fire Authority and I'd known a little about it, I hopped up and had five minutes.<sup>68</sup>

The rapid transformation of an unknown backbencher's first words<sup>69</sup> uttered in parliament to a headline story in a major newspaper<sup>70</sup> was not lost on Bolte.

Just happened to have caught a phrase that Victoria could be burnt from the Grampians to the sea, that's the heading, then you've got to read to find out who said it and what it was all about. Now that to me was my maiden speech. It took five minutes and I got front page, and ever since I've had the mortification of listening to birds talk for two hours and not getting one line in the Press. And it taught me a damn good lesson, that all you had to do was get a phrase and a subject and you could get on with the Press and the Press lapped you up and I think they've loved me ever since really, that I used to try and think their headlines for them. But it was that initial start, quite accidentally, that gave me, I hope, a flair for what I eventually had.<sup>71</sup>

That maiden speech, even if made off the cuff, is instructive in that it shows a great deal about Bolte and the way in which his political acumen was developing; it also begins to portray the face Henry Bolte would increasingly display to the electorate — the practical man, the earthy country man, the man deeply involved in his community. It says more than that: it demonstrates remarkably early in his political career that innate sense of knowing what was going on in the minds of ordinary Victorians,<sup>72</sup> and a deft flair for hitting that nerve with just the right combination of publicity and populism. It was an authentic *vox populi*.

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<sup>68</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/20.

<sup>69</sup> They were not quite his first words. Even though tradition holds that one does not interject until having delivered a maiden (now called inaugural) speech, Bolte did just that when a Labor member said of the 20 new coalition members: 'Look at them: there isn't a Phar Lap among them.' Bolte quipped: 'Maybe not, but we're still good enough to beat a few tired, old, party hacks.' Quoted in Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>70</sup> Bolte's recollection was that it made the front page of all three Melbourne morning papers. In fact, it ran on one only, the *Age*, and featured on p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Bolte interview, 1: 1/20-21.

<sup>72</sup> It was, of course, a day of high temperature and strong wind across much of Victoria, and the talk and fear would, naturally, have been of bushfires. It was not, however, merely a stab in the dark by the political newcomer for there, in a Melbourne newspaper the very same day his remarks were reported, was a headline: 'FEAR OF FIRE MENACE. Entire State Threatened.' It told of a warning issued by Mr A. Daw, chief officer of the Rural Fire Authority, who had returned to Melbourne after a tour of Victoria. 'People in every part of Victoria were terrified by the fire menace, Mr Daw said. In past years the fire risk had been largely confined to certain districts. This year the whole State was threatened.' (*Age*, 18 December 1947)

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Bolte was clearly learning quickly, and he threw himself into the demanding routine of an earnest and responsible local member, attending every sitting and parliamentary commitment, and responding dutifully to the welter of constituency correspondence, about 40 or 50 letters a week, all in longhand. Despite having the services of a typist, this was his preferred manner.<sup>73</sup>

Behind the scenes, however, there was turmoil and tension; it was an unhappy coalition.<sup>74</sup> Bolte and his fellow newcomers had walked into ‘one of the most unstable, venal eras in the history of Victorian politics’.<sup>75</sup> The *Age* was critical of the manoeuvrings of the main parties, describing the crumbling coalition as ‘a welter of cross-purposes and a tangle of jarring discords, animosities, jealousies and conflict’.

Electors are astounded and bewildered at the intensity with which two apparently united groups are at daggers drawn. Satisfactory government could never be expected from a coalition riven by such fundamental differences and antagonisms. Until grounds on which effective team work is possible have been closely surveyed, it would be self-deception to think that restoration of an unworkable association would give Victoria the type of government it needs, or achieve any other worthwhile end.<sup>76</sup>

With the postwar economy starting to develop, militant trade unionism was a constant source of conflict, and the government responded with the intimidating 1948 Essential Services Act. Hollway was to spend several months away overseas during which time the Country Party leader, McDonald, was acting Premier, commenting later that most of his time was spent trying to keep peace among the Liberal ministers.<sup>77</sup> Soon after Hollway returned, he settled a protracted tram strike in Melbourne, but for his troubles was accused by the former Country Party Premier, Albert Dunstan, then Minister for Health, of pursuing a policy of appeasement. Hollway responded by demanding Dunstan’s resignation, but the Country Party rebuffed him. He was then given authority by the Liberal Party to select a new Cabinet, and did so, excluding the Country Party.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/21.

<sup>74</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>75</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>76</sup> *Age*, 9 December 1948.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Barbour, *They Went Their Way*, Journal and Record, Traralgon, 1960, p. 106.

<sup>78</sup> Hughes and Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

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Six new Liberal ministers were appointed on 7 December 1948, among them Henry Edward Bolte as Minister for Mines and Water Supply who, according to one account, was promoted as a ‘result of his prior acquaintance with Hollway and the instability of Victorian politics at the time’.<sup>79</sup> Bolte himself preferred to think that it had more to do with allocation of portfolios according to geography.<sup>80</sup> The press reported at the time that a ‘section of the Liberal Party’ was surprised over the selection of new ministers and that ‘some of the appointments were quite unexpected’. If there was a consolation in this it was that some members felt that ‘the appointments are not intended to be regarded as permanent’ as there was still hope for reconciliation with the Country Party. Bolte himself was quoted: ‘I could have fallen over when I heard the news’.<sup>81</sup> The surprise omission was Edward Reynolds KC,<sup>82</sup> a well-connected barrister and recently elected at a by-election to the establishment seat of Toorak.

He was, by all reports, ‘an industrious, earnest Minister, good at figures, and with an increasingly combative manner in Parliament’.<sup>83</sup> One of the first pieces of legislation entrusted to the new Minister was a Bill to set up the Soil Conservation Authority, and the voice that spoke to it on its introduction was one belonging to a practical farmer.

I have some appreciation of the facts that control soil erosion. The deeper one delves into the subject the more one realises what little is known. I contend that our standard of living has been built up and will be maintained only by the conservation of the soil of this country...It is obvious that a nation's soil is its bank. Similarly a farmer's soil is his bank. It would be ludicrous to think that one may...go on continuously withdrawing from the bank without putting something back into it.<sup>84</sup>

Other bills Bolte put through the Legislative Assembly in his two years as Minister were ones overhauling the administration of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, legislation which facilitated funding for building such dams as the Cairn Curran, Rocklands and Glenmaggie, and the Bill by which Victoria joined the River Murray

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<sup>79</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>80</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/22.

<sup>81</sup> *Herald*, 7 December 1948.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Russell Thomas Reynolds (1892-1971) MLA Toorak 1948-52.

<sup>83</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.

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Commission. The doughty chairman of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, Mr L. R. East, had a reputation of eating new ministers (of which there had been many) for breakfast, but within a year of taking over the portfolio Bolte was telling colleagues he had East under control.<sup>85</sup> Bolte showed he had done his homework, and it was perhaps a measure of his effectiveness that the former Country Party Premier, Dunstan, who fancied himself as the expert on all things rural, singled him out for constant needling. Bolte thought he had done ‘a reasonable job’<sup>86</sup> as Minister, and Hollway agreed.

Henry had Mines and Water Supply at the start, a portfolio which nobody wanted. He soon proved himself a very hard worker who was prepared to listen. He had a good knowledge of agriculture and was absolutely honest, a quality not all that common in those days.<sup>87</sup>

If Bolte was a surprise choice for the ministry in 1948, and seen as merely a short-term appointment, he was to confound those of this opinion, being widely regarded for his hard work. It has been said of these years that they were the years in which his characteristic political style was formed,<sup>88</sup> and his shrewd intelligence was seeing things every day that he would one day do very differently. One of these was the leadership; Hollway was simply losing ground and quickly within his own party.

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/23.

<sup>87</sup> Blazey, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63.

### 3.3. The Deputy Leader and the Liberals' Civil War

**IN DECEMBER** 1951, the party voted Hollway out of the leadership by the narrow margin of 21 to 19<sup>89</sup> and elected accountant Les Norman, MLA for Glen Iris,<sup>90</sup> in a ballot contested by Hollway, Norman and Bolte, with Bolte tying with Norman behind Hollway on the first ballot but opting instead to drop out. The ballot for deputy leader actually favoured Arthur Rylah,<sup>91</sup> MLA for Kew, but there was a convention that leader and deputy leader of the Parliamentary Party should not both be drawn from either the city or the country area of the State, and Bolte was declared the winner. It was, said one report, 'the climax to a long period of dissatisfaction with [Hollway's] leadership'.<sup>92</sup> In contrast with Hollway's high public profile, both men were relatively unknown. The mass circulation *Sun* introduced them thus.

Mr Leslie George Norman, 38, new State Opposition Leader and LCP Leader, is one of the youngest members of the House. He is well-dressed, debonair and earnest. He served in the war and was a P.O.W. at Singapore...The new deputy leader, quietly-spoken Henry Edward Bolte, 43, has held several portfolios since he entered Parliament four years ago. He is one of the most popular members of the party.<sup>93</sup>

The *Herald* mused on Hollway's 'many excellent qualities', and remarked of Norman that 'not much is known to the wider public' but observed that he was 'a young man of spirit and ambition with a sense of public duty'. Of the new deputy leader there was no mention.<sup>94</sup> It was immediately clear why the change of leadership had been effected, with the *Sun* declaring that 'a reconciliation between the Liberals and the Country Party will be attempted following the election yesterday of new State Parliamentary Liberal leaders'. The paper's political writer, John Hill, noted that both Norman and Bolte favoured a renewal of friendly relations with the Country Party, and that Hollway in recent years had been antagonistic towards the Country Party. Norman, in a not too

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<sup>89</sup> It was in keeping with the revailing sense of disarray that the Speaker, Archie Michaelis, arrived at the meeting too late to vote. (*Sun*, 5 December 1951)

<sup>90</sup> Leslie George Norman (1913-1997) MLA Glen Iris 1947-52, Minister without Portfolio 1950.

<sup>91</sup> Arthur Gordon Rylah (1906-1974), MLA Kew 1949-71. Deputy Premier, Chief Secretary 1955-71, Attorney-General 1955-67, Minister of Education 1965, Minister of Health 1965.

<sup>92</sup> *Age*, 5 December 1951.

<sup>93</sup> *Sun*, 5 December 1951.

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subtle swipe at his predecessor, pledged the Liberal Party to ‘a straightforward line of policy’.<sup>95</sup> He was clearly setting out to distinguish his leadership from that of Hollway’s.

While Bolte had clearly made his mark in the party, there was little to celebrate in the months after his elevation to the deputy’s job as the Liberals turned on their own with ferocity, and again demonstrating to Bolte and others the high price paid for disunity. It was also another lesson in leadership for Bolte. He was less than enthusiastic about the man elected to lead — ‘foolishly, in my book, I don’t think Les Norman ever had it or ever would have had it’.<sup>96</sup> To Bolte the intense, brooding former prisoner of war was ‘starry-eyed’, clearly, in Bolte’s view, lacking political savvy. Even to his colleagues Norman was an enigma. John Don, for example, recalled him as ‘...a strange fellow in a way. I think any person who was a POW has just cause for being a little difficult, a little unusual’.<sup>97</sup> The appeal of Norman, it seems, was that he was untainted by the intrigue that had enveloped not just the Liberal Party but Victorian politics as a whole; but he was an amateur in Bolte’s eyes, making ‘an awful hash of it’.<sup>98</sup>

Norman’s inexperience was to show in the coming months, and would cost him and the Liberals dearly. Hollway had one further roll of the dice left as he continued to pursue the issue of redistribution, this time unfettered by leadership of an increasingly timid Liberal Party. He was also encouraged by dissatisfaction within the ALP over McDonald’s reluctance to implement a redistribution. Labor’s frustration with McDonald came to a head in July 1952 when Labor withdrew its support; six days later the Liberals agreed to assist the Country Party for the remainder of its term,<sup>99</sup> Norman having entirely abandoned his earlier bravado about forcing an early election.<sup>100</sup> Hollway again parleyed with Cain, proposing a Liberal-Labor alliance to end once and for all the gerrymandered electoral system. Hollway invited Lovegrove and McManus to a meeting

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<sup>94</sup> *Herald*, 5 December 1952.

<sup>95</sup> *Sun*, 5 December 1952.

<sup>96</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/25

<sup>97</sup> John Don interview, 26 July 2001.

<sup>98</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/26.

<sup>99</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>100</sup> *Age*, 5 December 1951.

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with his close friend, businessman Sir Gordon Snow, at which Hollway said he believed he could get sufficient numbers to form government if Labor backed him, and that he would implement a redistribution of Legislative Assembly seats on the basis of two Assembly seats for one Federal seat. By eliminating the weighted basis that favoured non-urban seats, the Country Party would lose its pre-eminence. Snow insisted that an agreement be drawn up by the prominent barrister, Eugene Gorman, which it was, and all parties signed.<sup>101</sup> It was a desperate gamble by Hollway that not only failed, but as in 1945, plunged the Liberal Party once more into crisis and schism.

On 17 September, and against his own party's wishes, Hollway moved a vote of no-confidence in the government over its refusal to act on electoral reform, the motion being defeated by 31 votes to 32. In retaliation, one week later, the Liberal and Country Party, in a move orchestrated by Warner, expelled Hollway from the parliamentary party,<sup>102</sup> by

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<sup>101</sup> McManus, *op. cit.*, p. 55. The pact was preceded by a preamble which concluded: 'Although the Labor Party and the other signatories differ on general political policy they agree on the immediate necessity for electoral re-division [sic], and solely to meet that necessity have agreed to support legislation to re-divide Legislative Assembly Electoral districts on the basis of two State districts for each Federal district.'

The terms of the agreement read as follows:

- (1) That a No Confidence motion be moved in the Legislative Assembly by Mr Hollway and supported by the Parliamentary Labor Party and the other signatories.
- (2) That if a Government be formed under the leadership of Mr Hollway or any other of the group of signatories, the State Parliamentary Labor Party will support such Government for the purpose of completing legislation to effect the re-division set out above and continue such support until the necessary legislation has been enacted and proclaimed.
- (3) The group of signatories agree that in the event of such a Government being formed they will, notwithstanding any change in circumstances, insist on the introduction of a Bill for Re-division on the lines agreed and support such Bill until it is enacted.
- (4) The parties of the agreement agree to do all things necessary to enable an election for the Legislative Assembly to be held as soon as possible after the proposed legislation becomes law.
- (5) The non-Labor signatories agree in the event of this Government being formed as proposed not to use Executive powers in respect of industrial matters without the prior concurrence of the Leader of the State Parliamentary Labor Party.
- (6) The Australian Labor Party (Victorian Division) will not endorse a candidate to oppose any of the signatories at the election for the Legislative Assembly immediately following the proposed legislation.

The agreement was signed on 16 September by Lovegrove and Cain on behalf of the ALP, and by Hollway on behalf of himself and his supporters Don, Hipworth, Dennett, Dawnay-Mould, Gartside, Tovell and MacLeod. (Cited in West, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-8.)

<sup>102</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

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a margin of 23 votes to nine.<sup>103</sup> Seven of Hollway's supporters<sup>104</sup> walked out with him at the end of the meeting, but announced that they would remain within the party to fight for electoral reform.<sup>105</sup>

The scene had been set for the most bizarre episode yet in the entire history of Victorian politics. On 30 September, on the eve of a State Council meeting, Norman rose in the Legislative Assembly to announce that he had in his possession a number of sworn statements relating to offers made by the Hollway group to secure support for the no-confidence motion on 17 September. Norman alleged Sir Gordon Snow, a Mr Raymond Ellison, Hollway and 'a member of a trade organisation' had attempted to bribe six members of the Liberal Party to support Hollway's motion.<sup>106</sup> A motion to refer the allegations of bribery to a Select Committee as a question of parliamentary privilege was rejected with the Government insisting that a Royal Commission was more appropriate to investigate charges of such a 'serious and sinister' character.<sup>107</sup> The opening hearing of the Royal Commission, headed by Chief Justice Sir Edmund Herring, took place on 27 October; it was also the final hearing. Hollway's counsel, Gorman, addressed the Commission which led to the raising of the issue of a possible contempt of court, arising from the fact that Hollway was suing the *Age* over its reporting of the allegations raised in the Legislative Assembly, and also intended, with Snow, similarly to sue a Sydney newspaper. Herring adjourned proceedings indefinitely.<sup>108</sup> The Chief Justice commented:

If we proceeded, there would in all probability be things spoken in the witness box that would prejudice, or be calculated to prejudice, libel actions now pending. The principle is that interference with justice is unlawful.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> West, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>104</sup> Dennett, Dawnay-Mould, Hipworth, Tovell, Gartside, Ludbrook and MacLeod.

<sup>105</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>106</sup> See *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 240, p. 2171; West, *op. cit.*, p. 29; White, 'Thomas Tuke Hollway', *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>107</sup> Stuart Sayers, *Ned Herring: A Life of the Honourable Sir Edmund Herring*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1980, p. 319; West, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>108</sup> Sayers, *op. cit.*, p. 320; West, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Cited in West, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

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Much argument, both at the time and subsequently, centred on the question not so much as to whether Hollway had sought supporters, which he had, but whether he had offered bribes to secure their support. Hollway himself was guarded, saying at the time the allegations were first raised by Norman that ‘Any approaching was done by myself, or by one of my colleagues, and I make no apology whatever for anything I have done’.<sup>110</sup> Hollway’s biographer, Kate White, suggests that it was likely Hollway had bribed colleagues, but cites contemporary sources as saying many politicians, Warner included, at that time bought patronage.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, McDonald and Norman had announced ‘a close working agreement’ on redistribution and joint party meetings,<sup>112</sup> but less than three days later Hollway had struck again when two of his supporters in the Legislative Council, Gartside<sup>113</sup> and MacLeod,<sup>114</sup> sided with Labor to refuse the Government Supply, forcing McDonald to ask the Governor for a dissolution.<sup>115</sup> McDonald’s request was refused, and instead Hollway was commissioned to form a ministry, the *Argus* referring to Hollway as a ‘stormy petrel’ who ‘made a dramatic political comeback’.<sup>116</sup> While Hollway desperately sought more supporters, plans to bring down his rebel government of just seven members were already being made before it was sworn in; it lasted just four days, long enough to secure Supply and nothing else.<sup>117</sup> Press opinion, while critical of the farcical nature of the development, was generally implicitly favourable towards Hollway and the stand he had taken.

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<sup>110</sup> *VPD*, vol. 240, p. 2171.

<sup>111</sup> White, ‘Thomas Tuke Hollway’, *op. cit.*, p. 244 and fn.

<sup>112</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> Charles Percival Gartside (1887-1958), MLC 1937-1955, Minister of Health 1948-50, Minister of Public Works and Prices 1952.

<sup>114</sup> Hugh Vernon MacLeod (1882-1955) MLC 1946-55, Minister of Agriculture and State Development 1952.

<sup>115</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>116</sup> *Argus*, 24 October 1952.

<sup>117</sup> Some things, however, changed. John Don, who served as Transport Minister in the rebel Hollway Government recalled: ‘The Railway Commissioners came to me and asked me to authorise a lift in the expenses they could incur without ministerial authority. The Country Party had screwed the Commissioners down so that they couldn’t spend anything over and above some ridiculous figure, like 500 pounds, without authority. This was so the Country Party could watch every single thing they did. It was a case of total control. So they named a figure they wanted and I doubled it. It gave me great pleasure.’ (Interview, 26 July 2002).

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Our recurring crises are a direct legacy of gross electoral distortions which result in no one party ever obtaining sufficient numerical strength in the Assembly to govern in its own right. What is needed is a voting system that would permit a reasonable alternation of office-holding by the major political forces, as happens in most comparable communities.<sup>118</sup>

The *Argus*, while noting that Victoria continued to stagger from one political crisis to another, appealed to politicians to consider the interests of the State ahead of party,<sup>119</sup> but cautioned against censuring politicians too severely.<sup>120</sup>

McDonald was once again commissioned to form a government pending new elections, and bitterly attacked Hollway, dubbing him ‘the great wrecker in politics’, and declaring that ‘his unstable character had at last been shown to the people’.<sup>121</sup> Hollway, for his part, announced he would fight the election under the banner of the ‘Electoral Reform League’, the ultimate objective of which was ‘to bring about a closely knit free enterprise party, which will become the major political force in the State’.<sup>122</sup> Hollway, never short of a surprise, then announced that he would vacate his seat of Ballarat and instead contest the seat of Glen Iris, held by Norman.<sup>123</sup> The Labor Party then announced it would not field a candidate against Hollway who had shown ‘high courage, and had honoured his pact with Labor in his advocacy of a fair electoral system, based upon one vote one value’.<sup>124</sup> Thus ensued one of the most bitter election campaigns in Victorian political history, especially in Glen Iris, which was characterised by ‘exceptionally malicious personal invective’, which even questioned Norman’s conduct during the war.<sup>125</sup> Hollway won the seat handsomely,<sup>126</sup> and Labor won the election. The Liberals, divided and bruised, saw their vote plummet from more than 40 per cent to under 25 per cent, and

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<sup>118</sup> *Age*, 30 October 1952.

<sup>119</sup> *Argus*, 24 October 1952.

<sup>120</sup> *Argus*, 31 October 1952.

<sup>121</sup> *Age*, 3 November 1952.

<sup>122</sup> *Age*, 1 November 1952.

<sup>123</sup> Norman claimed at the time that this was because Hollway faced defeat in Ballarat (*Age*, 7 November 1952), but White has argued persuasively that he had stood a good chance of retaining the seat, and that he enjoyed considerable personal support there. (White, ‘Thomas Tuke Hollway’, *op. cit.*, p. 249).

<sup>124</sup> *Age*, 3 November 1952.

<sup>125</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>126</sup> Hollway gained almost half as many votes again as Norman in an electorate of almost 29,000. (West, *op. cit.*, fn p. 34).

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their seats held slashed from 24 to 11.<sup>127</sup> A dazed Henry Bolte, forced to battle hard in his own seat,<sup>128</sup> was to comment later that ‘we were killed by the electorate’, and that ‘nobody would have survived, in my opinion, as Leader of the Liberal Party then’.<sup>129</sup> It was a real nadir for the Liberal Party; its ranks had been savagely depleted and much experience was lost; it was leaderless and seemingly wallowing, and a taint of tawdry corruption hung over its name; at grass roots branch level the membership was bitterly divided. It looked to all the world like a party going nowhere.

It was not just voters who were confused; Liberal Party members themselves were in revolt in some electorates, supporting in some cases those who stood with Hollway against official LCP candidates while others simply expressed their disgust at the infighting which had consumed the party. In the safe Liberal seat of Brighton, for example, the party acknowledged that the election had been fought ‘under considerable difficulties’, the principal one being the split among the LCP branches in the electorate and ‘the really bitter antagonisms that were aroused’. Brighton had been held by one of the Hollway supporters, Ray Tovell, against whom the party endorsed an official Liberal candidate. The result of the split was that two of the five branches in a strong Liberal area, Hampton and East Brighton, not only broke away from the official LCP, but worked and canvassed hard on behalf of Tovell. The post-mortem on the seat, which Tovell retained, noted that ‘he had made himself very popular among large number of voters, especially the women, who were very loathe to hear anything against him’, and in their eyes he was ‘a very nice man’. Indeed, many Liberals were so annoyed that they voted for the Independent Labor candidate (the ALP did not endorse a candidate) in preference to the ‘official’ and ‘rebel’ Liberals. The endorsed Liberal, the Mayor of Brighton, sought to sheet home the charge of disloyalty against Tovell, a retired Brigadier, noting as he did in his manifesto: ‘The principle that by accepting Liberal

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<sup>127</sup> Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 492. The official LCP vote was 24.85%; the Electoral Reform League, which won 4 seats, obtained 9.59%. Four ERL candidates were endorsed by the LCP.

<sup>128</sup> He held it by just 72 votes. (Bolte interview 1:1/20).

<sup>129</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/27-8.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

endorsement a parliamentary member declares his intention to abide by the decision of the majority of the party in all political issues'.<sup>130</sup>

Outside the city, Liberals played it carefully. In his seat of Hampden, where he was forced to preferences, Bolte urged the electors to show restraint: 'Stick to the man you know and the man who has served you well. Vote for Equal Representation of Country and City Electorates. Don't Let Your Interests be Swamped'.<sup>131</sup> As he would do all his political career, he emphasised practical matters.

I have now had the honor of representing you for over five years in the State Legislative assembly. I have devoted all my time to your interests, and if re-elected will continue to do so. I am determined that the problem of flood waters will be solved, and that amenities, such as electric power and telephone, will be provided throughout the electorate. I wholeheartedly support equal representation of city and country in parliament by equitable re-distribution.

A vote for me is a vote to save Hampden.<sup>132</sup>

When the shock of the loss suffered by the Liberals had sunk in, the party turned not on the Country Party nor on the victorious Labor Party but on the Hollway rebels. On 17 December 1952, members of the Hollway group were excluded from a meeting of 'loyal Liberals' convened to consider the election losses and party leadership. However, it was decided to allow all of the rebels, excepting Hollway himself, to attend the meeting the following day at which a new leader would be elected. The group declined the invitation, insisting it would sit in the Assembly as an independent corner group until such time as Hollway was readmitted to the parliamentary party.<sup>133</sup> At the meeting the following day, Oldham was unanimously elected leader, and Bolte deputy leader.<sup>134</sup> It was a safe choice

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<sup>130</sup> State Election Brighton Electorate, December 1952, UMA 6/1/1/3.

<sup>131</sup> Election advertisement, *The Mail*, Ballarat, 25 November, 1952.

<sup>132</sup> State Election Hampden Electorate, December 1952, UMA 6/1/1/3.

<sup>133</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>134</sup> A Member of the Legislative Assembly for 19 years, Oldham was one of the most experienced Liberals. A partner in a Melbourne law firm, his relationship with his colleagues had been patchy. He had become deputy leader in 1945 after Macfarlan fell from grace bit, in accordance with a previous agreement, resigned the post in 1947, when Kent Hughes returned to State politics after his release from Changi prisoner of war camp. Oldham was to regain the post in 1949 when Kent Hughes moved to Federal politics. Two years later he was to lose it when, as Hollway's deputy, he was closely associated with two-for-one. The much depleted party after the 1952 election put this behind it as it looked to his experience. At the time of his election, Oldham was vice chairman of Henry Berry & Co (Australia) Ltd and a director

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rather than an inspired one, his considerable ministerial experience<sup>135</sup> weighing heavily in his favour among an inexperienced team. It represented a significant comeback for Oldham both politically and personally, as he had become a teetotaler after a serious drinking problem.<sup>136</sup> He was, in effect, almost the last man left standing. One of his contemporaries remembers him as possessing ‘no great leadership qualities’. He continued: ‘He was a pleasant enough fellow, but a bit of a manipulator in his way. He just came to the top, having no great claim for the job other than seniority’.<sup>137</sup> So depleted were the Liberals’ ranks, that Bolte, the surviving deputy, did not even contest the leadership. It was, on the whole, a makeshift team of convenience, and as a parliamentary opposition, in Bolte’s view, was ‘a not very effective one either’.<sup>138</sup>

The Melbourne *Herald*, which had supported Hollway, was critical of the Liberal Party for its ‘changes of mind and final timidity over the electoral reform issue’, and commented that those who were in charge of its fate at a vital time ‘grossly misjudged the mind of the electorate on this great issue’.<sup>139</sup> It was a telling criticism, and one wonders whether Henry Bolte had read it, because judging the mind of the electorate, with an almost uncanny perception and disarming clarity, was to be the hallmark of his leadership in years to come. Whatever his subsequent failings, misjudging the mind of the electorate was never among them.

The *Herald*, always close to the Melbourne business establishment, quietly cautioned against recriminations and called for a clear expression of leadership.

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of Hoadley’s Chocolates Ltd, Ruskin Motor Bodies Ltd, and Ensign Dry Cleaners Ltd. (West, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36 fn.) Oldham was also well connected in the party, having been a founder member of the Young Nationalists, and campaign director for Sir Stanley Argyle when he was UAP leader. (See Geoff Browne, *Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1900-84*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1985, p. 165.)

<sup>135</sup> Assistant Housing Minister 1943-45, Attorney-General and Solicitor-General 1947-50, Minister of Health 1948, Chief Secretary 1950, Deputy Premier 1949-50.

<sup>136</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/28.

<sup>137</sup> Don interview, 26 July 2002.

<sup>138</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/28.

<sup>139</sup> *Herald*, 8 December 1952.

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The great thing for the Liberal Party to do now is to put aside the personalities and bickerings of the past, and set out to re-build the party on the principles of true Liberalism. This will be a difficult task, but it is not an impossible one. It has been done before by parties which have suffered defeat, and it can be done again. The great requirements are a clear definition of aims, avoidance of alliances or groupings based on temporary expediency, and the recruitment of many more good young supporters and candidates.

There will also need to be a clear agreement on leadership. No party can hope to go forward with confidence if its leader is expected to hold office by a bare majority of one or two votes.<sup>140</sup>

Despite warnings to look to the future and not to the past, the rancour of the events of 1952 and the bitter election campaign inevitably spilled over into parliament when it reconvened in 1953. It was a most uneasy gathering: the Labor Party sported a healthy majority, the Liberals sat in opposition though outnumbered by the Country Party, and the Hollway group took up a position on the sidelines. Ironically, it was the Hollway group of four which enabled the Liberals to maintain official opposition status. Not that this counted for any easing of tensions: a motion to readmit Hollway in March was defeated by 18 votes to one.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Argus*, 11 March 1953. The sole vote cast in Hollway's favour was that of Alec Dennett (Caulfield). The group at this stage insisted its members were still Liberals, and not a separate party.

### 3.4. Leader by Accident

**AN ALREADY** damaged and much reduced party had not suffered its last blow at the disastrous 1952 election. Oldham was to die in May 1953 on his way to London for the Coronation.<sup>142</sup> If the party had been weakened numerically by its savaging at the polls, fate had now taken a hand in robbing it of much-needed experience; it was truly a vacuum. Bolte was obviously a contender, but so too was a suave and urbane Melbourne lawyer, Arthur Rylah, MLA for Kew since 1949, who had stood for the deputy leadership in 1951. Whether it was through Warner's lobbying, as West suggests,<sup>143</sup> that Bolte eventually succeeded to the leadership is unclear as several contemporaries of Bolte's insist that Warner's influence has been greatly exaggerated.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, Warner at the time did wield influence, and it would not be surprising, nor is it in any way sinister, if he did indeed champion the cause of the Member for Hampden whose practical ways would have appealed to a self-made man like Warner. Warner, as has been noted, was an implacable foe of Hollway — not just over the man's devious ways; there was, it seems, an intense dislike of Hollway's aesthetic side and his friendship with Labor and union figures; moreover, there was, ultimately, Hollway's indifference to the business community of which Warner saw himself as representing. Nor did Hollway try to disguise his antipathy towards business, and at the height of his popularity just after he became Premier in 1947, a detailed profile gave prominent mention to the fact.

There is none of the solemn gravity of the old-time conservative leader in him, none of the suavity of big business. As a matter of fact, big business has never been very keen on him. And he has been less keen on it.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Argus*, 4 May 1953.

<sup>143</sup> *West*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>144</sup> Personal interviews, Lindsay Thompson 24 July 2002, John Don 26 July 2002.

<sup>145</sup> *Herald*, 3 January 1948.

It would be surprising if Warner had been unaware of Hollway's history of friction with the business community and his knack of upsetting powerful financial interests whose support the Liberal Party (as had the UAP) needed. As early as 1941, when Hollway had first taken over as leader of the UAP, and had raised the issue of electoral reform, the party's financial wing, the National Union, was stung into action and even went so far as to publicly question why Hollway had not joined the second AIF.<sup>146</sup> It would have been easy for Warner to see that a man like Bolte would have no such difficulties. To Warner's shrewd businessman's eye Bolte possessed the indispensable political advantage of being, like other leaders of the Liberal ascendancy such as Playford in South Australia and later Brand in Western Australia, 'fundamentally a horsetrader, invariably sympathetic to the demands of metropolitan as well as rural producers but by no means inflexibly committed to their satisfaction'.<sup>147</sup>

There were also hard heads in the Liberal Party organisation who were keenly aware of the parliamentary party's shortcomings and its ineffectual history. Prominent among these was J. M. Anderson, a Melbourne businessman and member of the party executive, later State President from 1952 to 1956. Like Warner, with whom he had a close relationship, Anderson had little time for Hollway and his methods, seeing him as an undisciplined and disruptive figure. He would later tell an interviewer: 'My assessment of the situation was we could never get anywhere with the type of blokes we had. We knew we had to get rid of them completely, otherwise we would be out of power'.<sup>148</sup>

Anderson began to take a close interest in Bolte, and it was no coincidence that the Member for Hampden gradually began to get greater public exposure as the Liberal

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<sup>146</sup> See Aimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-8; White, "Hollway: an atypical Liberal leader?" *op. cit.*, p.321.

<sup>147</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>148</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

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spokesman on radio station 3XY whose broadcasting licence was then held by the Liberal and Country Party.

We picked on Henry because he showed he had flair. He was shrewd but not cunning. That's what appealed to us. He was a man on the land, in direct contrast to the people we'd been used to. He was always ready to sit down and talk things out.<sup>149</sup>

Being pitchforked into the leadership, as Bolte was, brought him into contact with problems and issues he had never encountered before. In addition, the position of Leader of the Opposition at the head of a party of 11, and the Government in command of a large majority, was significantly less relevant than it might have been in other circumstances. Such was Cain's dominance not just of the parliament but of the entire political landscape that Bolte was often to complain that political journalists ignored what he had to say and were interested in speaking only to Cain.<sup>150</sup> Bolte quickly discovered that all his problems did not involve confronting the Government, and that precious energy was taken up with grappling with the Hollway group and the Country Party as well. It was an arduous learning experience for the tyro leader and he applied himself well; the lessons he learned were to stand him in good stead for the tough times ahead and he saw this period as having caused 'iron to enter the soul'.<sup>151</sup> It gave him a valuable insight into tactical thinking, and in Cain he observed at close quarters how sheer dominance can be used to great effect not only to rally supporters but to crush opponents. Cain was described as 'a vigorous, even ruthless tactician, adverse neither to stretching standing orders nor to ignoring them when circumstances demanded or opportunities permitted...'. Indeed, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly at the time was later to reminisce that the Premier was a 'dictator' and a 'constant trial to Speakers'.<sup>152</sup> If Henry Bolte had once ever been 'Billy from the Bush', he certainly was no longer; ruthlessness, political acuity and a fine appreciation for tactical advantage had been learned in the heat of battle. Having mastered the task despite its inherent difficulties, he believed that the motley little

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>152</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

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band that he led, bruised and battered that it was, eventually developed into ‘a damned good Opposition’.<sup>153</sup>

Bolte, however, was regarded by most observers as little more than an honest plodder, and the general opinion was that he would remain leader only until a suitable successor could be found and groomed.<sup>154</sup> His way to the top was not by way of ambition, as he himself admitted on many occasions; on the contrary, his blunt self-description was ‘a political accident’. When it came his way he simply accepted it. As he put it: ‘I treated it as if it was just another job. All you can ever do is apply yourself and do your best’.<sup>155</sup> It was a typical understated Australian response to a challenge. A man destined to be not only a future close associate of Bolte’s but also a future Premier, Lindsay Thompson, had been pre-selected for a vacancy in the Legislative Council, and one of his first duties as a candidate was to be interviewed by Bolte, whom he had not met before.

I came home and my wife Joan said to me what did I think of the seat-warmer - the general feeling being that he was there only till somebody more able came along. I said: ‘Well, I don’t know about this seat warming business. He has large penetrating eyes that look straight through you, and I felt he summed up the issues in the by-election concisely and effectively.’ I had the feeling he might warm up the seat and enjoy the warmth for some time.<sup>156</sup>

Bolte, always the realist, was under no illusions about what political oppositions can and cannot achieve, and no matter how well his team was performing, its opportunity for success depended on the Government faltering.<sup>157</sup> In the months after he assumed the leadership in the winter of 1953, Bolte saw little indication of this happening as the Labor Government confidently embarked on a far-reaching legislative program that enjoyed popular support. Cain had a clear mandate to govern — a novelty in Victoria — and he set about rewriting the statute books with a flurry of activity, quickly passing into law the redistribution act, measures concerned with workers’ compensation and with workplace

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<sup>153</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/28.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Jean Holmes, *The Government of Victoria*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976, pp. 8-9.

<sup>155</sup> *Sun*, 7 June 1968.

<sup>156</sup> Thompson interview, 24 July 2002.

<sup>157</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/28.

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conditions. In 1953, in a real coup for Victoria, Tattersall's lottery was lured from Tasmania, and a Trotting Control Board was created. A new Crimes Act was passed, censorship laws were strengthened and the Government revitalised key instrumentalities such as the Housing Commission, the Tramways Board and the Hospital and Charities Commission.<sup>158</sup> The Cain Cabinet, said one observer who was later to play a key role in bringing it down, 'had a good record of social reform, in the characteristic Labor tradition'.<sup>159</sup> Cain as Premier was at the zenith of his power and his popularity; the ruthless political operator enjoyed an avuncular public image — an ever-present pipe like Chifley and a positive demeanour that was at once assured, reasonable and approachable.<sup>160</sup> The Royal Visit — the first by a reigning monarch to Australia — in 1954 added even further gloss. Cain looked secure and invincible.

The reality was somewhat different. Dark tectonic forces were moving within the Labor Party, and it was only a matter of time before they would surface dramatically and destructively; the Labor Party was to be sundered and Cain engulfed and destroyed. It had not come out of the blue, and some inkling of tensions ahead was evident to some at the time of the 1952 election which saw elected several Labor men, 'youngish, aggressively Catholic' and fired by the battles now being fought in the unions by the Catholic-organised Movement of B. A. Santamaria against communist influence. Just as many Liberals had come to resent Hollway, so too there were ALP people who were critical of Cain and 'the old wheeler-dealing traditions he stood for'.<sup>161</sup> The result was a Caucus fraught with tensions, and a Cabinet rife with suspicion.<sup>162</sup> If on the surface everything seemed to be running in Cain's favour, there were marked undercurrents of sectarianism, creating 'a chronic weakness, leading to mistrust, personal animosity and secret faction meetings'.<sup>163</sup> Somewhat ironically, Cain's problems were severely

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<sup>158</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>159</sup> B. A. Santamaria, *Santamaria: A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 112.

<sup>160</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>161</sup> Robert Murray, *The Split: Australian Labor in the Fifties*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, p. 94.

<sup>162</sup> Scully was included in the Cabinet to satisfy Grouper demands; Merrifield, Minister for Works, had been named at a Royal Commission as a communist sympathiser; Holt, Minister for Lands, was a left-winger with a pronounced sensitivity to organised Catholicism. (See Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-5).

<sup>163</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

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compounded by the electoral reforms he had implemented, and those propounded by Hollway, which reduced the number of low population country divisions and increased the number of Melbourne seats, unnerving sitting members, creating new opportunities to influence pre-selection (especially by the Groupers) and generally causing ‘instability and rivalry for several new seats’.<sup>164</sup>

The tensions erupted towards the end of 1954 when the Federal Labor leader, Evatt, launched an attack on the Victorian ALP,<sup>165</sup> which rapidly set in train a series of destabilising events. To those outside the simmering Labor cauldron, it was obvious that temperatures were rising; Bolte noted that ‘you could pick it even in the House, you didn’t have to listen in at a party, a Caucus meeting’.<sup>166</sup> Bolte’s political instincts by this time were well honed, and he played a tactically astute game while warring factions within the ALP tore each other apart. Well aware that he had the ability towards the end of the Spring sittings in 1954 to have ‘busted’ the Government there and then, he nevertheless prudently held his fire. He admired Cain but also knew Cain was under intense pressure from within his own ranks; so rather than move on his opponent, who had shut the parliament down, he extracted a promise from Cain to meet the following March, even though Cain had secured Supply until the end of June.<sup>167</sup> Sensing what he did, Bolte might easily have decided to sit and wait; but this was not his style.

Demonstrating growing political skills, Bolte waded into the fray and began talking to the pro-Grouper elements in Cain’s government who were dismayed at the turn of events. Bolte mixed easily with them, sharing the rough camaraderie of the bush and the relaxed mateship of the pub. In terms of courting what would later become the DLP and winning its trust, Bolte’s straight talking was a key asset. The men who would leave the ALP had no reason to trust or even like the Liberals, and few of them did. These men had spent a lifetime in the service of Labor and the union movement; distrust of the old

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<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>165</sup> White, ‘John Cain’, *op. cit.*, p. 167; Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>166</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/29.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/29.

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class enemy did not vanish overnight. There was a genuine mutual regard, as Frank Scully, one of the Labor breakaways, would later recall.

Bolte was an astute politician, and obviously out for himself first and foremost but we [in the DLP] found him honest, in that he kept his promises, and was remarkably frank at times...Certainly, he was very fair in any dealings I had with him. He'd look at things on their merits, as he saw them, and give an instant decision. If he couldn't help, he'd tell you why. He was helpful to a lot of our blokes. He didn't hedge...<sup>168</sup>

Bolte, for his part, had little difficulty in dealing with the DLP; quite apart from his recognition that his political survival depended on its continuing support, he had a deep personal regard for the men who had sacrificed their careers, and he had more than passing sympathy for the positions they adopted.<sup>169</sup>

I had a lot of time for most of the founders of the DLP, a hell of a lot of time for some of them, I really did. They were all true to their principles and made great sacrifices. They gave up safe seats in parliament, in Cabinet, no less! They must have known that they were giving up their political careers when they crossed the floor to defeat John Cain.<sup>170</sup>

Whereas Hollway the lawyer had a limited objective in mind (electoral reform) in his dealings with Labor, the knockabout Bolte, who had no qualms about the public bar, had a greater strategic aim — to destroy the Government and enlist the help of its dissidents in hastening that destruction. It was a task that neither of his immediate predecessors could have managed; not the staunchly conservative and reserved Methodist Norman, nor the reliable but stolid Oldham. Bolte was a pro-active player, meeting on several occasions in secret at the raffish Port Phillip Hotel in Flinders Street with the Coleman-Barry group of ALP plotters,<sup>171</sup> with the overt aim of discussing and plotting 'how we'd toss Cain'.<sup>172</sup> Bolte's drinking mates were seasoned political operators and battle hardened, Hayes in particular having sat in the Assembly since 1925. They were also all

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<sup>168</sup> Prior, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>169</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/33.

<sup>170</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>171</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 72. The group took its name from the two key pro-Grouper ministers in the Cain Government, Les Coleman (1895-1974) MLC 1943-55 and William Barry (1899-1972) MLA Carlton 1942-55). Both were ousted from Cabinet in March 1955. They attended all the meetings with Bolte, as did Tom Hayes (1890-1967), MLA Melbourne 1925-55, also sacked, and Frank Scully. (See Bolte interview, 1:1/30).

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Catholics. If Bolte had been accorded merely the status of invitee on the grounds that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’, this would have been perfectly understandable given the hothouse atmosphere of the times, but diffidence was not part of Bolte’s make up, neither personally nor politically. The discussions, he was later to recount, revolved not on the issue of when or why to move against Cain, but as to how. Bolte, marvelling at his own brashness, had the answer which he put to the ALP conspirators, and to his very considerable surprise, they bought it: he, the Liberal Leader of the Opposition, would move a motion of no confidence in the Cain Labor Government. Not content to be merely a cypher, Bolte went on to frame the actual content of the motion, based on the informal meetings he had held, in terms that they would accept. It was a remarkable achievement by any measure, but it demonstrated Bolte’s innate ability to reach across the political spectrum, however distorted it was at the time, to seal a political deal with men whose political beliefs may have differed from his but whose backgrounds and social milieux were decidedly similar to his own. As it was, Bolte saw many of these men socially, especially at the races; as it was with men they yarned about the horses, the weather, politics. Men such as the Grouper supporter, Les Coleman, Minister of Transport under Cain until the purge of March 1955, would have a lot in common with Bolte. A publican (who also owned the Port Phillip Hotel) as well as a qualified accountant, his world would have been a familiar one to Bolte, who grew up in a pub-owning family that respected self-improvement. Tom Hayes, long time MLA for Melbourne, had been born in Ararat and worked on the railways there — a piece of territory within Bolte’s electorate and where he had played a lot of sport in his youth. Clearly, Bolte could win their trust and negotiate with them in a common language, and he understood that language — ‘I gave them a little bit of a guernsey’ was the colloquial expression he used in recalling the event many years later.<sup>173</sup> He was playing for high stakes and he knew it; Hollway had fallen from grace through parleying with Labor, and Bolte was well aware of the risks he was running from his own side. He had something to prove.

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<sup>172</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/30.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/30.

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I could make it sound terribly easy, but there's nothing so easy about it really. In reminiscing and with hindsight things do appear easy, but I can assure you they weren't at the time, because here I was still an untried, unknown – in fact what did they say when I was first elected Leader? 'Unknown, unheralded, stopgap' something or other, 'temporary leader'. And I always had that at the back of my mind, too, that it was possible, if you flummed it you were gone... You don't get two chances.<sup>174</sup>

Bolte could not have known it at the time, but he was not only investing in the coming destruction of Labor, he was also buying himself a priceless insurance policy that would underwrite his record term in office. The Labor dissidents with whom he was negotiating, at considerable risk but with reciprocal trust, were the men who would leave Labor and form the Democratic Labor Party whose solid and highly disciplined flow of preferences to Bolte in the years ahead would enable him to string together election win after election win. Of course, while he was having secret talks back in 1954-55, the DLP as such did not exist; but when the dust began to settle after the ALP split, Bolte was not slow in seeing the strategic advantages its very existence conferred, and not just electorally for him but extending far beyond the borders of Victoria.

The DLP itself was a show that I admired, I had a lot of time for it, I'd nurtured them. It was in my own interests to keep them in business; I believed it was in the country's interests to keep them in business. And I approached it with that in mind, believing that I was doing the right thing. I did honestly keep them in business... Every election I'd say to them, have them in my office, did it personally, 'How much do you require for this election? How much have you raised? Tell me honestly.' They'd say, 'We want a hundred thousand, we've raised sixty, we'll try and raise another ten. Can some of your friends help with thirty?' And I had my friends who used to put the hat round and then deliver it to them. And I knew all about it and they knew I knew all about it, and my friends knew where it was going, too; there was nothing that was going into the Liberal Party ending up with them. But it was necessary, I believed, that they would be kept alive. I believed that they were good for the country. Their policies, particularly on foreign affairs and defence and those matters, which are outside the State field I'll frankly admit, but unless they were alive in Victoria they were dead in Australia.<sup>175</sup>

All this, however, was still in the future as Bolte maintained his clandestine contacts at the Port Phillip Hotel. His contacts were still desperately searching for a compromise<sup>176</sup> when parliament reconvened on 19 April, a month after a massive public bloodletting in

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<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/31.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/32. At the 1955 elections, the Australian Labor Party (Anti-Communist) received 12.61 per cent of the valid formal vote; in 1958, as the DLP, this had risen to 14.43 per cent. By 1961 it was 16.95 per cent (its peak); in 1964, 14.97 per cent; in 1967, 14.29 per cent; and in 1970, 13.3 per cent. Hughes and Graham, *op. cit.* pp. 493-6; Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1965-1974*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977, pp. 110-1.

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which a total of 104 members were expelled in Victoria,<sup>177</sup> and Cain reconstructed his Cabinet, minus four ministers who had been expelled — Barry, Coleman, Hayes and Scully. The Cain Government was doomed, a fate clearly sealed when it tried to push through an Appropriation Bill but the Opposition called a division and the ALP breakaways crossed the floor on the vote,<sup>178</sup> joining the Liberals, the Country Party and the Hollway group, which now called itself the Victorian Liberal Party. The division was lost 37-24, and the Cain Government was all but history. Bolte then rose and moved a no-confidence motion which he had written in consultation with the Labor dissidents.<sup>179</sup> It read: ‘That as the Government accepts direction from sources which in the opinion of this House endanger the security of the country and the welfare of the State, it does not possess the confidence of the House’.<sup>180</sup> A long, impassioned and acrimonious debate followed; at one stage Barry was showered with 30 silver coins by an erstwhile colleague who dubbed him ‘Judas’.<sup>181</sup> When the vote was finally taken at 4.20 a.m., Cain’s Government fell by 34 votes to 23. Cain resigned his commission and elections were set for 28 May. During the election campaign, the Federal Labor leader, Evatt, acknowledged Bolte’s role in the toppling of Cain, informing a meeting at the Essendon Town Hall on 24 May: ‘Before they put the Government out, they consulted Bolte’.<sup>182</sup> It was a supreme accolade, albeit unintended. Cain went into the campaign under no illusions, believing both Labor factions could win between them a mere 21 seats;<sup>183</sup> he was exactly right. Whatever Cain’s tactical advantages in that doomed late autumn campaign of 1955, one thing he lacked, which Bolte had, was a united party. This was a

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<sup>176</sup> White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, *op. cit.*, p. 172; Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>177</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>178</sup> White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>179</sup> Bolte was insistent that he write the motion and move it when parliament reconvened despite Barry’s insistence on doing it Bolte would not have it because ‘it would have elevated him, and put me down. I won that battle, and it had far-reaching consequences’. (Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 45.) Bolte’s political cunning was evident in the wording which was intended to suggest that the four men chosen to fill the Cabinet vacancies left by the breakaways had been nominated not by the Premier or Caucus, but dictated from outside. It was, as Ross Fitzgerald, has called it, a case of ‘Cold War rhetoric... running far ahead of reality’ as the four chosen – Doube, Gray, Sheehan and Tilley – were ‘perfectly ordinary Labor men, and Doube and Sheehan were Catholics’. (Ross Fitzgerald, *The Pope’s Battalions: Santamaria, Catholicism and the Labor Split*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2003, p. 146).

<sup>180</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>181</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>182</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>183</sup> White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

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supreme irony because in the 1952 campaign it was the Liberals with the ‘embarrassing breakaway tail’, and now Labor shouldered that burden.<sup>184</sup> Labor, not surprisingly, suffered a crushing defeat; Henry Bolte, the unknown, was suddenly Premier. Of the 34 seats the Liberals won, nine were due to preferences from the Coleman-Barry group<sup>185</sup> which won only one seat in its own right. Bolte had invested wisely.

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

<sup>185</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

### 3.5. The Premier: 'Get to Know the People'

IT WAS A time of tension and unease as late autumn in Melbourne gave way to the leaden, grey winter that the city is known for. The Korean War was still a vivid memory and the conflict there remained unresolved; the communist emergency in Malaya was under way and Australian troops had been committed; and tensions were flaring between communist China and Formosa (Taiwan). The newspapers were full of the communist menace, atom bombs were being tested, and the first detailed account of the Petrovs and their activities was being serialised. Against this simmering background, the Labor Party was daily ripping itself apart; the breakaway Coleman-Barry group was loudly denouncing the communist influence in the unions and the ALP, and at the Federal level, Evatt's tenuous hold on the leadership was being assailed by the anti-communists. Certainty was conspicuously lacking; the threat of instability abounded. The earthy 47 year old sheep farmer from western Victoria, so very recently the political unknown, suddenly looked the goods; the party he led with its weighty contingent of ex-servicemen stood solidly behind him, the Hollway rebels having rapidly faded from prominence, more so since the electoral redistribution had been carried out. The seasoned campaigner John Cain, against whom Bolte had so very recently seemed hopelessly outclassed, was now a haunted man — under attack on the Right by the breakaways and unable to control the Left.

Bolte, plain man that he was, campaigned accordingly; he spoke a practical language. In his policy speech, for example, he cleverly contrasted his party with Cain's, candidly conceding that 'a certain amount of trouble is not unknown in my own...' But he had been decisive in this regard, which he said had been instrumental in the electorate's rejection of the Liberals in 1952, and he linked himself to the electorally successful Menzies.

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We have used the time well...we have dismissed the intriguers. We come before you as a united party free from plots and bargains. A united party with 60 candidates throughout the length and breadth of Victoria and supported by our Federal leader, Mr Menzies. We are united under one leader and support one policy. We ask for your vote, not on account of the obvious weaknesses in our opponents, but because of our strength. This strength has been recognised by you already. As electors of Victoria, in the last 12 months you have returned my party as your Federal Government.<sup>186</sup>

Bolte knew what the message he had to deliver was, and he knew how he wanted to deliver it. A newcomer to parliament, former schoolmaster Lindsay Thompson, was asked by Bolte to help draft the election manifesto, and he saw at first hand Bolte's preferred directness.

Anything that wasn't definite he crossed out. "We will look at...we will consider..." that all went. Can we do it, he asked? How much will it cost? He then wrote: "We will..."<sup>187</sup>

That, said Thompson, impressed people, the fact that he knew what he was going to do, how he was going to do it and then did it. In his policy speech, Bolte focused on the bread and butter concerns of average Victorians: bigger housing loans, rent reform, probate and land tax concessions, and drastic action against car thieves. With his canny eye on the newspapers and highlighting a reformist approach, Bolte promised an immediate end to the temporary housing site known as Camp Pell, source of many horror stories of misery and squalor, and announced that the Housing Commission would be directed to make slum abolition and building of homes its main object. It was a well pitched message; Bolte knew full and well that the majority of voters on whom he depended had already experienced a war, followed by a Depression, followed by another war, followed by ten governments in ten years. They now wanted some good years, and what they sought was a combination of prosperity with stability.<sup>188</sup>

Once elected, and with the completion of the count showing he did not have to enter a coalition with the Country Party, Bolte moved swiftly. Right at the outset, he urged his new members to get out among the people, telling them at their first meeting, as one new

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<sup>186</sup> LCP Policy Speech, Ararat, 28 May 1955.

<sup>187</sup> Thompson interview, 24 July 2002.

<sup>188</sup> Barry Muir, *Bolte From Bamganie*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1973, p. 50.

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MP recalled: 'I want you to be everywhere, accept every invitation. If two dogs meet in the street you be there'.

It was his spirit that put a lot of heart into the party. Members quickly realised he was a down-to-earth gentleman who did not ask us to do the work and not do it himself. He went out of his way to accept invitations from members to open this or that, and it did not take them long to realise he was acceptable.<sup>189</sup>

Bolte put great emphasis on loyalty,<sup>190</sup> which was always to him a two-way street. Of the 34 members the Liberals had in the new Assembly, 23 of them were new; as leader he knew they owed much to him already, and he counted on that being known.

A 'stopgap' leader I may have been, and probably was, but I was a winner, and that's what bloody well counts in the long run. Two-thirds of the members in my first Government owed their seats to me. I know they weren't all admirers of mine, but it would have been discourteous, to say the very least, not to have given me the chance to show what I could do...I told the new members to get out in their electorates and hustle, to get to know the people who had voted for, and against, them; to sell themselves as the party representing social and industrial peace. I also said I didn't want any personal rivalries or ambitions interfering with our general programs. I didn't want any grudges held, any scores settled. We were a team, and I was the captain.<sup>191</sup>

If one part of Bolte told him he deserved to stay on as leader (and, after all, he had won the election and earned his chance) another was clearly nagging at him, the unrelenting tag of the 'stopgap' which he found difficult to shrug off. Beneath the supremely confident exterior of the political victor there lurked a man still uncertain, as evidenced by a remark in his first week as Premier to his permanent head that he was unsure how long he would be there, 'but it won't be for long'.<sup>192</sup> It was a feeling reflected, albeit

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<sup>189</sup> Jim McDonald, friend and racing partner of Bolte, elected to the seat of Burwood in 1955. Quoted in Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>190</sup> It is difficult to over-emphasise the quality of loyalty that was so much a part of his character. It was a key factor that underpinned his leadership for its entire duration, and stood in stark contrast to the machinations of those who preceded him or held sway within Liberal ranks. Bolte honoured his debt to the men who left the Labor Party and formed the DLP, far beyond what was politically necessary. Men such as Frank Scully and Jack Little (subsequently a DLP Senator) were provided with newsagents' franchises, thanks to Bolte's intervention with the Victorians Newsagents' Association and the Herald & Weekly Times Limited. (See Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 54). When his private secretary for many years, David Gray, sought a change from the irregular hours of political life, Bolte, unprompted and on his own initiative, called the head of Australia's biggest company, BHP, who offered Mr Gray a position in the share registry. (Correspondence with author, 22 May 2002).

<sup>191</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>192</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

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subliminally, in the newspapers, too, at the time; a profile in the *Herald* two days after his election victory emphasised the role of chance in his rapid rise, the headline reading: PARTY TURMOILS SHOT FARMER INTO PREMIERSHIP. The man himself, wrote journalist Geoffrey Tebbutt, seemed to lack definition; he had no ‘striking characteristics’ and had not managed thus far to have ‘aroused public curiosity’. But, after a brief physical description of this ‘prosperous, practical farmer’, Tebbutt went on to mention Bolte’s love of horse racing and a colt he had just acquired. He also quoted some of his ‘warmer admirers’ suggesting that he was ‘a little in the earthy mould of Tom Playford’, Liberal Premier of South Australia since 1938. Tebbutt commented that Bolte would have a long way to go to match Playford’s ‘force of character, nimble mind and dominating personality’, but he came very close to identifying what was to become Bolte’s great appeal.

(T)he obscurity and uncertainty in which the Liberal Party in Victoria has dwelt in the past four years may have concealed the virtues in Mr Bolte’s plain qualities...As a public speaker, the new Premier is neither subtle nor forcible, neither humorous nor thrustful, a performer of fair average quality who has lately shown some improvement.

His outlook and temperament are derived largely from the life he has led before and during his political career. He likes to cite the intensive development of his own 1000 acres as an example of what might be done for the State as a whole. He has never added to his original acreage, but he has won more and more from it. Rural development, finance and housing are his favourite subjects.<sup>193</sup>

Prominent in the party’s election campaign and in Bolte’s campaign speech was the subject of housing — a burning issue in the post-war years dogged by inflation, unmet expectations and material shortages. Just two days after the election the Liberals said they would move immediately on their pledge to help and encourage people to buy their own homes by authorising the State Savings Bank to lend up to £4000 (\$8000) on a house and to guarantee advances on smaller houses up to 95 per cent of their ‘fair value’.<sup>194</sup> New lending institutions sprung up to broaden the base of lending finance, and the implementation of the policy resulted in the first Bolte impact on Victoria — the stimulus to the burgeoning new suburbs that rose as people with families moved out of

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<sup>193</sup> *Herald*, 30 May 1955.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*

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cramped inner-city accommodation. It was a key plank in Bolte's strategy, and is illustrative of his sense of the public mood, recognising as he did that housing was not only the key to the economy, but also the key to politics. Consistent with his practical approach, Bolte kept a close watch over housing construction figures and even arranged with the Commonwealth statistician's office to see them in advance before they were released to the public.<sup>195</sup> Bolte was well aware that home ownership was an integral part of the 'Australian dream', and that its active encouragement gave people a stake in society; it contrasted sharply with Labor's collectivist approach, encapsulated in the unfortunate remark of the Federal wartime Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, John Dedman, that as soon as Australians obtained a home of their own they became 'little capitalists'.<sup>196</sup> The difference between then two positions reflected the ideological struggle of the 1940s and the conflicting visions for a post-war Australia (see Chapter 1), and one biographer of Bolte has written that Dedman's words 'burned into Bolte's soul'.

If Dedman felt that way for the Labor Party, Bolte was equally determined Australians should be free to own their own homes if they wished. Home-ownership is a basic plank of Liberal philosophy. The party overwhelmingly endorses the view that an individual's home is his castle and that the family, which means the home, is the basic building block of democracy. The provision of housing became priority number one for the new Government. The objective was to create a vast, home-owning democracy.<sup>197</sup>

It was a message that Bolte trumpeted at every available opportunity, never failing to impress it upon any audience; nor did he waste an opportunity to wring political mileage out of Dedman's words. For instance, when he was campaigning for the Legislative Council elections the month after the 1955 elections for the Assembly at which he was elected, he emphasised that the Liberals, in their housing policy, were vitally concerned with the welfare of the average person. He declared in a speech at Bendigo: 'We want to set up a race of "little capitalists" — homeowners. And we hope to implement the major portion of this plan when Parliament resumes later this year. It is our aim that the people, whether young or old, shall own their own homes'.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>198</sup> *Age*, 8 June 1955.

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Bolte never wavered from this aim. He set about reforming the Housing Commission and embarked on a campaign to encourage public housing tenants either to buy their homes or build new ones — an extraordinarily successful campaign that eventually saw more than 33,000 Housing Commission tenants purchase their homes. Bolte ignited a building boom that extended throughout his Premiership, with more than half a million new houses and flats being built. Indeed, the efforts were to give Victoria what was claimed as the highest rate of home ownership in the world — some 71.8 per cent according to the 1971 census.<sup>199</sup> Bolte as a leader tapped into the post-war expectations that this was a new age of opportunity and prosperity, an age that would seek to make amends for the hard years of war, Depression and war again. Many years later he took satisfaction in his achievements, reflecting an unwavering political philosophy, and noting, in passing, that Victoria had been a ‘conservative joint’ when he took office.

When you look back, it was a crime to buy a pound of butter after six o'clock. There were no little shops open. To me the most important thing was private enterprise. I based all my political philosophy and action on one thing, ownership, and as mainly applied to home ownership. If I wished to be remembered for anything...it would be the promotion of home ownership...But it doesn't only go there. If you believe in ownership and you believe in private enterprise surely you believe in the little corner shop doing some business after six o'clock, surely you believe in petrol stations being available, if they want to be open, to fill your car with petrol. Surely to God the old six o'clock swill [6pm hotel closing] had to go. Surely to God the [illegal] SP [starting price] bookie had to go and when the TAB [Totalisator Agency Board] took over we even had a legal bet. All in order, all with proper decorum.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Muir, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>200</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/29.

### 3.6. Government the Bolte Way

**THAT FIRST** party meeting in the early winter of 1955 as the triumphant Liberals crowded into the room, with many members meeting each other for the first time, entrusted Bolte with the right to select his Cabinet<sup>201</sup> (but after 1958 reverted largely but not entirely to the party). Only five of his team of 14, himself included, could boast previous ministerial experience,<sup>202</sup> which the *Age* commented ‘need not be a liability’.<sup>203</sup> It proved to be a remarkably resilient team; it was, as one observer put it, ‘an above-average collection of the available conservative forces of the day’.<sup>204</sup> By the time Bolte handed over the reins to his successor, Hamer, 17 years later there were still two members of that first Cabinet remaining, Chandler and Reid. Governments, like people, can grow old and weary, and Bolte ensured that while maintaining stability there was a constant infusion of new talent (and, cannily, a perception of imminent opportunity for backbenchers). It became his style always to make at least one change after each election — and the plum job of Victorian Agent-General in London enabled him to shed senior ministers such as Leggatt (in 1956) and Petty (in 1964) without bloodshed or rancour. As one long-serving Bolte Minister put it: ‘He liked the idea of gradually bringing in young blood. That created an atmosphere of loyalty; it was very effective’.<sup>205</sup>

That first Bolte Ministry of 14 had a solid, establishment flavour to it; if solidity and reassurance, not to mention loyalty, were what people sought in those uncertain and fear-riddled times, then this was a group of men positively exuding those qualities. There

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<sup>201</sup> The *Argus* reported: ‘Members of the new Parliamentary Liberal-Country Party yesterday unanimously agreed to suspend the Party’s Standing Orders to allow Mr Bolte, Premier, to select his own Ministry. Normally the selection is made by an exhaustive secret ballot of the Parliamentary Party’. (4 June 1955).

<sup>202</sup> Bolte, Minister of Water Supply and Mines 1948-50, Minister of Conservation 1949-50; Warner, Minister of Housing and Materials 1947-50, Minister of State Development 1948-49, Minister of Electrical Undertakings 1949-50; Chandler, Minister without Portfolio 1943-45; Leggatt, Chief Secretary 1948-50, Minister of Lands and Soldier Settlement 1950; Maltby, Minister without Portfolio 1934-35, Minister of Lands and Forests 1935, Chief Secretary, deputy Premier and Minister of Electrical Undertakings 1945, Minister of Electrical Undertakings and Mines 1950.

<sup>203</sup> *Age*, 8 June 1955.

<sup>204</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Lindsay Thompson, 24 July 2002.

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were five lawyers, three farmers and graziers, two real estate or stock and station agents, and a psychologist, horticulturalist, newsagent and businessman. Eleven of the 14 were returned servicemen, including four who had served in World War I and two had served in both world wars. All of the eleven, except Bolte, had been officers. It was a ministry of men with a marked practical bent, and those who had served during the Liberal years of chaos and division were deeply scarified by the experience and keen to apply those lessons. Bill Leggatt, who served in the first Bolte Cabinet, and was one of the five with previous ministerial experience, said to Bolte early in the campaign as he was drafting his policy speech: ‘Whatever you put in the screed for heaven’s sake don’t include anything that you are not sure of being able to carry out’.<sup>206</sup> It was advice that Bolte heeded, even in the light of one newspaper editorial that cast a sceptical eye over his election promises, commenting that they were ‘lavish and no doubt will have to be pruned’.<sup>207</sup> Such a comment underestimated Bolte and his steely determination to get Victoria moving: by the time the 1958 election rolled around, a total of 318 Bills had been put through parliament, by far the highest number since records were kept.<sup>208</sup> It has been suggested that given Victoria’s recent history of political instability, Bolte was still unsure of his tenure, thus the need to achieve his goals in the shortest possible time.<sup>209</sup> Whatever the reasons behind the flurry of legislative activity, it was making a mark as the new Government busily legislated for ‘a minor social revolution in what had become a moribund Victoria’.<sup>210</sup> In quick succession, Bolte pushed through legislation enabling extended trading hours for small shops, women to serve on juries, the lifting of price and rent controls, extended hours for the sale of petrol, an inquiry into Pentridge prison and an unsuccessful referendum on hotel trading hours. Bolte himself was acutely aware of the need for action rather than talk, and he kept the Cabinet on its toes in this regard, as a former Minister recalled.

Everybody was entitled to a say in Cabinet – but not too long a say. Cabinet meetings had to end by one o’clock on a Monday. Some ministers would come in carrying a huge

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<sup>206</sup> Quoted in Lindsay Thompson, *I Remember*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1989, p. 34.

<sup>207</sup> *Age* 6 June 1955.

<sup>208</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>209</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

pile of papers, and Henry would say: "Look, just tell us why you need to do it, how much it will cost and what will happen if you don't do it."<sup>211</sup>

Bolte was well aware of keeping in touch with the electorate, and testing opinion on his administration. He made a careful point of inviting leading businessmen several times a year to come over to his office and tell him how they thought the Government was going; Bolte, in his countryman's fashion, listened carefully and made no promises. It was, in any case, a most useful nexus to have, ensuring as he did that he would not run foul of the business community without advance warning. Early in his first term when he was concerned that the press coverage he was getting was less than he thought he deserved he called Jack (later Sir John) Williams, head of the Herald and Weekly Times, an old confidant of Hollway's, and asked him if he could bring a few friends down to his office for an informal chat. Williams, though puzzled, readily agreed, and Bolte duly arrived with four men in tow — E. V. Coles of Coles Brothers, Norman Myer of the Myer Emporium, Reg Ansett of Ansett Airlines and Eddie Cohen of Carlton and United Breweries, who just so happened to be the four biggest advertisers in the *Herald* and *Sun*.<sup>212</sup> Bolte had made his point eloquently and forcefully.<sup>213</sup>

Bolte's first major political task was to see a renegotiation of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement at the Premiers' Conference. If Bolte's approach to politics was already a highly pragmatic one, then the experience of jousting with Prime Minister Menzies and other leaders at the gatherings served merely to reinforce this tendency. What is more, it enabled him to observe closely at first hand the wiles of Menzies, and Bolte proved to be a shrewd observer. It had long been a matter of concern to Bolte that the Commonwealth had retained the power to levy income tax, first introduced as a wartime emergency measure, and he constantly railed at the iniquities of the uniform taxation system in its impact on Victoria. Menzies, he quickly came to realise, never

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<sup>211</sup> Lindsay Thompson interview, 24 July 2002.

<sup>212</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>213</sup> The account is confirmed by Bolte's former private secretary, David Gray, in correspondence with the author.

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seriously wanted to hand back the taxing powers to the States, but Menzies would never say this openly.<sup>214</sup>

It was a forum that Bolte enjoyed immensely, not only for what he was able to win agreement on, but for the figure he cut at it and the exposure this gave him in the electorate; it provided him with the means of shaping the image he sought to present. Enter Bolte the Victorian champion.

I felt that the Premiers' Conference had value. It had value even if you didn't get what you wanted from it. It was a foil; it gave Premiers an opportunity to assert themselves, it gave them an opportunity of testing themselves against other Premiers, of testing themselves against their Federal colleagues, as happened in my case, and of showing your own people back home whether you had any guts to you or not, too. I think politically it had a tremendous advantage, it had that advantage if you could accept it. If you could become known as a fighter in Canberra. Every Victorian loves Victoria to be fought for...<sup>215</sup>.

This was new for the electorate, as Victorians were singularly unaccustomed to having their political leader publicly taking up cudgels so aggressively on their behalf.<sup>216</sup> After he had been in office for a year and the autumn sittings ended, he set out for overseas on the first of his highly successful (and successfully publicised) missions which he called 'Promote Victoria'.<sup>217</sup> It was an approach that was to be emulated by other State Premiers. It was, of course, a calculated risk; but Bolte was not by nature a risk taker; he had subtly sounded out public opinion, having mentioned casually to several journalists that it was time someone 'sold Victoria' overseas. It had to be done, however, at the highest political level; it was no good sending away officials or even ministers; it had to

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<sup>214</sup> Bolte interview, 1:1/35.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/34.

<sup>216</sup> Bolte never let up on his fight against uniform taxation and never missed an opportunity to illustrate how the larger States were, unfairly in his view, subsidising the smaller ones. The author recalls attending a press conference of Bolte's in 1968 just after the Premier had returned from a visit to Western Australia during which the WA Premier, Sir David Brand, proudly showed him a new bridge being built. When Bolte asked what it was to be called and was told that no decision had been made, he said he replied: 'Why don't you call it the Bolte Bridge because Victoria is paying for the bloody thing.'

<sup>217</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

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be someone at the top of the tree. The journalists agreed enthusiastically, and the plan was then carefully laid.<sup>218</sup>

It was yet another fortuitous turn in the rise of Henry Bolte that provided the platform for his expedition abroad: the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956, which were already well into the planning stages by the time he became Premier. Well aware that the Olympics would focus an international spotlight on Melbourne, Bolte was keen to exploit this attention, and the head of the Premier's Department, John (later Sir John) Jungwirth was dispatched on an advance mission to ascertain interest in the Games, chiefly in the United States and Europe. He returned with a positive message, convinced that the Games could, and should, be used to boost Australia, and especially Victoria. On the back of his recommendations, Bolte decided the time was ripe for him to go and 'sell' Victoria in Canada, the United States and Britain.<sup>219</sup> Bolte and the officials entrusted with the mission were careful to ensure that nothing was left to chance, and advance publicity was arranged through a US public relations company that spread the word.

His visit to the United States is being undertaken in order to attract more industrial and general investment to the State of Victoria. Mr Bolte believes that the outstanding success achieved by so many American enterprises with headquarters in Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, is the best possible inducement for further investment from the United States, which he feels is a paramount need for Victoria. The sustained large-scale Australian migration programme, in which Victoria is participating to a greater degree than any other State, calls for tremendous capital investment, and Mr Bolte hopes that American businessmen will take the initiative in moving into Victoria with capital and new enterprises.<sup>220</sup>

The advance publicity also described the man who was spreading the word about Victoria: 'With quiet good humor, friendliness and tact, the Honourable Henry Edward Bolte rose rapidly in the ranks of the Liberal Party in the State of Victoria and less than eight years after he first won a seat in Parliament, he was called upon to lead the

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<sup>218</sup> Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-8.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>220</sup> Advance press release and biographical note, National Archives of Australia, Series A 10302/1, Item 1959/190.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

Government of the State'.<sup>221</sup> In accordance with protocol, Bolte wrote to the Prime Minister outlining his plans, and Casey, Minister for External Affairs, wrote back to him offering assistance from Australian diplomatic missions. But Casey, a long time friend of Bolte's, went even further, offering to help with his extensive overseas business contacts, such as Russell Leffingwell of J. P. Morgan's, John McCloy of Chase Manhattan, Sir William Wiseman of Kuhn Loeb 'as well as others that are not in my mind as I write'.<sup>222</sup> Casey followed this up with personal letters of introduction to key people in the New York business and finance world,<sup>223</sup> and also endeavoured to give to each of them an idea of the man they might expect.

I do not believe that he has been to the United States before. He is a farmer by profession and has been Premier of the State of Victoria for the last couple of years [sic] – aged about 43, and a very decent, commonsense, intelligent and honest fellow. He is very much interested in the development of his State and would like very much to discuss this sort of thing with anyone who might be interested in your part of the world. I think that he has a few specific proposals in the United States but not, so far as I know, any particular matter that he would want to discuss with you.<sup>224</sup>

As a staff member remarked, no Premier had ever left Victoria so well briefed.<sup>225</sup> Government officials worked assiduously on one project after another for the Premier's brief, including complete details of how American and other overseas enterprises had prospered in Victoria, and once in the US his grasp of the detail, and his evident enthusiasm for the opportunities on offer, ensured him (and the State of Victoria) wide coverage. His press secretary later wrote in awe of Bolte's 'versatility, his initiative, and his shrewd understanding' from 'a country man who had climbed so quickly to the top in State politics'.

I felt he was a plain, honest politician, with a mind of his own. He was not backward, however, at adopting worthwhile suggestions from others. Thus he got a great deal of

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<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> Casey to Bolte, 17 April 1956, NAA, Series A 10302/01, Item 1959/190.

<sup>223</sup> Casey to Bolte, 3 May, 1956, *ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Casey to Leffingwell, 3 May 1956, *ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> Barbour, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

co-operation in his big task. Much of his success came from a good understanding of human nature, and a desire to do the best he could for the State and the people.<sup>226</sup>

The man once derisively dubbed ‘Billy from the Bush’ now cut a figure on not just the Victorian and Australian stages, but on the world stage as well. The list of foreign leaders Bolte called on in his travels is impressive, ranging from one United States President, three prime ministers of Japan, to Emperor Haille Selassie of Ethiopia; he was to note that he had probably ‘travelled more than any Federal Minister in the sense that when I went away I stayed longer in fewer places than they would’.<sup>227</sup> Yet he was acutely conscious of representing Australia, not just Victoria.

Although I was in the State field I felt that when I was overseas I never mentioned Victoria, never mentioned Victoria in any speech I made; it was Australia. And I kept it that way. They wouldn’t understand States, if you go overseas, you’d be talking hot air.<sup>228</sup>

Bolte the salesman did much to consolidate his hold on power, and establish his dynamism in the public mind. But almost simultaneously he was shaping his image on another front as a political strongman in what was to be the first of many well-publicised clashes with the trade union movement — this time over his decision to abolish automatic quarterly cost-of-living adjustments to wages based on movements in price of a range of items including food, rent, clothing, fares, power and cigarettes. Bolte argued that they fuelled inflation.<sup>229</sup> His timing of the confrontation was exquisite, and revealed a tactical finesse that would become one of his main political hallmarks. In just two months from the time of his announcement, Melbourne would be hosting the Olympic Games; he calculated correctly that the unions would not risk any disruption with the world looking on.

By the time of the 1958 election, Bolte had become well known and his Government had established its credentials for getting on with the job. Victoria was in sound shape, the Liberals were united and Labor continued in disarray, further weakened by Cain’s death

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<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 150-1.

<sup>227</sup> Bolte interview, 2:1/5.

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.*, 2:1/7.

<sup>229</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

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in 1957. Even the *Age*, by no means an uncritical supporter of Bolte's, was emphatic about what the electorate should do in 1958.

On its record the Government fully deserves to be returned to the Treasury benches. It was probably one of the most inexperienced Governments ever to take office in this State, but it has governed well, with enthusiasm, vigor and impartiality to all sections of the community. The effect is reflected in the lively progress of the State.

Leaving all these things aside, however, the real question which electors have to examine is capacity to govern so that stability and progress can be maintained. On this score the Liberal-Country Party is the only party that can command the support of the responsible voter. The alternative is a return to the minority government rule which did so much to retard Victoria's expansion over a long period of years.

Those who are not affiliated with any party, therefore, cannot help but feel it is a duty of citizenship to renew the mandate of the Bolte Government.<sup>230</sup>

The election of that year was the first to be fought since the introduction of television in 1956. The new medium, naturally, interested Bolte, as it did all other politicians in the public eye. The issue was even raised at Cabinet that this was going to be the first television election and it would be wise for Bolte to get a bit of coaching about performing for television, a suggestion that surprised the Premier. 'Why?' he asked. 'Look, all you have to do is listen to the question, look at the interviewer and then give a direct answer'.<sup>231</sup>

Bolte had much to say during the campaign, especially about his Government's achievements. He made frequent reference to his trip overseas in 1956, and his 'hundreds of personal interviews with overseas industrialists' which had resulted in many new industries being attracted to Victoria. It was a fact, he repeated, that over the past three years more than 50 per cent of the overseas capital invested in Australia had been invested in Victoria, and that more than 40 per cent of the migrants arriving in that time had settled in the State.<sup>232</sup> It was his way of saying that times had never been better. Victorians obviously thought so, too: the Liberals gained five extra seats, giving them 39 in a House of 66.

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<sup>230</sup> *Age*, 30 May 1958.

<sup>231</sup> Lindsay Thompson interview, 24 July 2002.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

It is history now how Bolte went on to repeat his election successes in 1961 (39 seats), 1964 (38), 1967 (44 in an enlarged Assembly of 73) and 1970 (42). His continued electoral appeal was based very much on the way in which he had established himself in his first term in 1955: strong economic growth, sound administration, Victoria first.

While the 1961 election was clouded in the unpopularity of the Menzies government and the ‘credit squeeze’, Bolte had no hesitation in seeking to build on what he had already started and, after talks in Canberra with the Prime Minister, expressed the view that there would soon be a major and immediate easing of finance for home building, which there was. Bolte deftly capitalised on the move by saying how much Victoria would benefit from immediate starts on War Service homes, and that he would also make a further \$1 million available for the Home Finance Trust to finance the building of 180 new homes in the State and advance up to \$5,500 on extended terms for approved applicants. It was a major boost to confidence and stimulated a rush of applications for housing loans.<sup>233</sup> Just weeks before the 15 July election the Reserve Bank announced an easing of credit restrictions and the Ford motor company announced a \$10 million expansion program for its plans at Geelong and Broadmeadows, hailed by Bolte as ‘a tangible example of faith in the country’s way of life’.<sup>234</sup>

His clashes with unions became legendary, and underlined his populist appeal, such as when he said of striking teachers in 1968: ‘They can strike till they’re black in the face. It won’t make any difference’.<sup>235</sup> His decision to hang the convicted murderer Ronald Ryan in 1967 aroused great opposition and controversy, but did not hurt him electorally; he had judged the public mood well, even if some might say cynically.

By 1970, Bolte’s last election, both the Bolte style and the Bolte government to some observers had become *passé*; interest began to shift from Bolte the invincible to Bolte uncharacteristically scrambling merely to retain office. There were some sound reasons

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<sup>232</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

<sup>233</sup> Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.

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why this perception was held: its long run without serious incident had ended with a scheme to open up marginal farm land in far western Victoria being criticised by agricultural experts, conservationists and the media; the Public Solicitor was forced to resign over a financial scandal; revelations were made of gross over-crowding in State welfare homes; accusations of serious inefficiency were made over the Public Works Department, and allegations were aired about police corruption and an abortion racket.<sup>236</sup> The pundits wrote off Bolte too swiftly, failing to take account of two significant elements in the equation: Labor's capacity for self-sabotage and Bolte's wily resilience. On the first count, Victoria's Left-dominated ALP executive released its own policy speech the same night as the party leader, Clyde Holding, pledging to phase out State aid to private schools in Victoria which was in direct contradiction to Labor's Federal policy as well as Holding's own views.<sup>237</sup> Bolte had a surprise or two of his own: at his campaign launch on 12 May, he said he would not run on his record, but nevertheless gave a brief account of it and Victoria's leading role in national development. Before outlining some key initiatives in education, transport and the environment, he announced that the theme of the policy speech was about 'human happiness and contentment' and this was best furthered by a political philosophy that upheld the primacy of the individual and the family.<sup>238</sup> Here was Bolte, rightly, taking credit for 15 years of prosperity, but cleverly embedding his message into the well-honed themes of progress, development and the Australian way of life — but this time with a tilt to new concerns about the environment and 'quality of life' issues.

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From the very start, Bolte made it clear who was in charge of the Government and who spoke for it, a lesson learned from the Hollway days when press coverage highlighted 'the conspiratorial nature of State politics'. While Bolte was intent on maximising his own coverage (always believing that space devoted to him was space denied to his

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<sup>235</sup> Quoted in Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>236</sup> Muir, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>237</sup> Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

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opponents) he shied away from what he saw as Hollway's attempted manipulation of the press when stories appeared in the morning papers quoting 'a senior Minister' only to have 'a senior Minister' denying it in the afternoon paper. 'It was Hollway both times', Bolte told a biographer, adding that he told his Cabinet at the outset that he did not want to see any 'senior ministers' in the papers, and if they got in the papers 'they would get out of Cabinet'.<sup>239</sup>

Bolte's resolve to control as best he could the way in which his government was presented was instrumental in his decision to hold daily press conferences, but the wily Bolte used the frequent contact with journalists as a two-way street in much the same way that a farmer yarning over the fence gathers information as much if not more than he imparts. In one such instance, analysed by his biographer Peter Blazey, Bolte is shown using an informal chat to learn that one of his younger backbenchers, not especially favoured by Bolte, had given a television interview about a contentious issue, and that journalists were impressed with him and likely to write about him favourably. At the same press conference, a few days before Christmas, Bolte expresses the view that he does not want to 'start anything' and just wants to 'pull down the shutters for Christmas', explaining that his shearers' cook was away and he and his wife had to cook for the shearers on Christmas Eve. A throwaway line it might have been, but next day's afternoon papers each had 'well-displayed human interest photos of him at 6.30 a.m., talking to his shearers'. Bolte knew well the political value of 'presenting himself as a homely son of the soil'.<sup>240</sup> Bolte himself admitted after he retired that he had often used journalists as a sounding board on ideas he had and 'if they were receptive to it I might give it a fly in a week or two's time'.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Policy Speech of the Hon. H. E. Bolte, 12 May 1970, typescript, National Library of Australia.

<sup>239</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-2.

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 185-91.

<sup>241</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/23.

### 3.7. Bolte and the Liberal Party

**THE LIBERAL** Party that Bolte inherited had singularly failed to realise its potential. From the time of the Macfarlan rebellion in 1945 through to the Hollway breakaway in 1952 it had been riven with tensions. Hollway, under whose leadership Bolte had served, fought just as much with the Liberal organisation as he had with the old United Australia Party, there being much of the old 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal individualist in Hollway's make up. Indeed, as White has observed, Hollway and his style of politics were demonstrably unsuited to the demands of the new Liberal Party.

The Liberal organisation demanded strict adherence to both the party constitution and its policy. The new, more broadly-based party restricted its politicians' individual initiatives. Hollway neither made the transition to being a strict party man nor learnt successfully to manipulate the party apparatus to consolidate his own support.<sup>242</sup>

Bolte was much more the party man. It was not so much that he simply toed the party line reflexively as his acknowledgement that politics was a team endeavour; further, his over-riding pragmatism was reinforced by the damage he had seen inflicted on the party by disunity. In addition, Bolte, as a member of the State Executive of the party, was very much a part of the process that expelled first Hollway and then his followers; his unanimity of purpose with the party organisation was clearly apparent. This was, in any case, a very different relationship between the parliamentary wing and the party organisation from that which had characterised the loose and often tenuous links between wings in the old UAP. Aimer has pointed out that the men who assumed leadership positions in the early years of the party in Victoria 'stood in no awe of politicians, least of all State politicians...' and that of the succession of State presidents 'none was disposed either to adopt a passive role within the organisation, or to see the extra-parliamentary

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<sup>242</sup> White, 'Thomas Tuke Hollway', *op. cit.*, p. 271.

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organisation take a passive role within the party'. This attitude was embodied in subsequent constitutional amendments which culminated in 1953 in the declaration that State Council was to be 'the governing body of the Party' and was to 'determine the Platform and Policy of the Party'. It marked a radical departure from the past for a major non-Labor party, explicitly shifting ultimate responsibility for policy making to State Council, and placing the parliamentary party, theoretically at least, in a position subordinate to it; it was a 'relationship...more in accordance with the principles of orthodox Labor than non-Labor'.<sup>243</sup>

The devastation of its parliamentary numbers at the 1952 election was a sobering experience for the Liberal Party, but in a curious way the changes that were hastened by this rout more closely resembled the ideals enunciated by the party's founders a decade earlier — a broad-based party of branches in which members could actively engage in policy formulation and promotion. Whereas other leaders might have seen this as a diminution of their traditional sphere, and possibly even moved to resist it, Bolte was in fact an active part of the process that devised and implemented it. When the State Council convened in the Assembly Hall in Melbourne in August 1953 (the first attended by Bolte as leader) the State President, J. M. Anderson, was conscious of the party's embarking on a new start, noting in his opening address that it was a 'red letter day' for the Council as it was the first occasion on which it met with the parliamentary members as voting members. Anderson observed: 'That is just another stepping stone in welding together in complete unity our Parliamentary Party and the Party itself — they can always act in complete accord'.<sup>244</sup> The Council Meeting was a fateful one for the Liberals, called upon as it was to ratify the expulsions of the Hollway group; its collective cauterising of the wounds of the recent past, a painful experience for many of the

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<sup>243</sup> Aimer, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>244</sup> Minutes of Tenth State Council Meeting, 19 August 1953, UMA 2/1/1. The extent to which Anderson in particular was prepared to go to rebuild the party cannot be over-estimated. In an illuminating remark to Bolte's biographer, Barry Muir, Bolte spoke of Anderson's fierce determination: 'He was a tremendous president who stuck by us in the dark days of the split. He was more determined, even than those of us in the Parliamentary party, to go clean. As it was, we got down to eleven [members]. He was prepared to go down to six, if necessary, to start afresh'. (Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 210).

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members, effectively drew a line in the sand and publicly reaffirmed the primacy of party over parliamentarian. Typical of the many speakers who raised the issue of unity and discipline was the president of the Burwood West branch.

When people consider a motion such as this there is only one action to take. If you have someone in a public company or an institution that person must pull his weight. It does not matter what damage will be done. What damage has already been done. It is incalculable. And until such time as we stand firm and consolidated this party will find trouble ahead, but when people see we can make a decision and stand by it we can rally support.<sup>245</sup>

Bolte himself had no doubts that the party had to move forward and move together, and in his first address as leader he embraced the absolute need for unity, noting that he had ‘very strong feelings’ on the question of expulsions, but they were ‘not personal feelings’.

We are in this fight to try and defeat our political enemies and those of us who feel that way. Well there is room for us in the LCP. Those of us who do not feel prepared to defeat our political enemies, well, they have got to find another camp. It is very sad but that must happen.<sup>246</sup>

The immediate outcome saw a close working relationship develop between parliamentary and organisational wings, not least in the area of policy development. By the end of 1953, the Executive called on the joint policy committee ‘to prepare and submit to the Executive as soon as possible recommendations on the matters of State interest’. This ignited a flurry of party activity, the policy committee meeting with a frequency throughout 1954 and 1955 rarely equalled and resulting in a constant stream of policy issues being submitted to the Executive for approval and to the Council for ratification. In several instances, branch resolutions agreed to by the Council were incorporated directly into the party’s election platform<sup>247</sup> — grass roots democracy at work *par excellence*.

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<sup>245</sup> Minutes of Tenth State Council Meeting, 19 August 1953, *op. cit.*

<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Aimer, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

The internal documents of the Liberal Party at the time reveal much about both the party itself and the preoccupations of its active membership; this was truly the grass roots based party that its founders, Menzies in particular, had envisaged at work. There was, for example, a strong push to have State Council meeting times changed to enable ‘delegates engaged in normal occupations to be available to attend’;<sup>248</sup> indeed, it was felt in some quarters that meeting mid-week ‘unduly restricts the Branches in their choice of Delegates and denies them and the Council of the services of many of their best members’.<sup>249</sup> The thrust of agenda items was essentially reformist; for instance, the abolition of slum housing<sup>250</sup> was prominent as was a call for the removal of trading hours of businesses supplying essential services provided that ‘no employee be compelled to work beyond existing award hours’;<sup>251</sup> an inquiry into conditions at Pentridge prison,<sup>252</sup> and reform of the law that prohibited the publication of Sunday newspapers in Victoria.<sup>253</sup>

There was clearly no shortage of policy ideas from the branch membership, and the Bolte Government’s legislative program, as has been noted, was comprehensive; yet for some in the party it was not enough, and resentment began to appear at the perception that the Government was ignoring the party. By 1958, despite the Government’s impressive record, a resolution from State Council viewed ‘with concern the number of resolutions passed by State Council which are not acted upon by the Party’s Parliamentary Representatives’.<sup>254</sup> Bolte, meanwhile, at the instigation of the party’s executive, set about improving the state of communications between the parliamentary party and the membership, issuing Parliamentary Party Bulletins outlining current issues and detailing the Government’s work. For example, in Bulletin Number 15, Bolte reiterated the Government’s efforts in championing the cause of home ownership, the encouragement

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<sup>248</sup> Motion from Darling-East Malvern Branch, Agenda, Twelfth State Council Meeting, 24-25 August 1954. IPA Papers, NBAC N136/52a.

<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*, motion from Cheltenham Branch.

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*, motion from Kew South East Branch.

<sup>251</sup> *ibid.*, motion from Camberwell Middle Branch.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*, motion from Prahran Branch.

<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*, motion from Ashburton Branch.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

of co-operatives and other lending institutions, and its ongoing negotiations with the Commonwealth in that regard.<sup>255</sup> In Bulletin Number 39, he went into considerable detail on how he had drawn the Commonwealth's attention to the role of the Commonwealth Bank and how the migration program was not being matched by the increase in home building.<sup>256</sup> And just in case members had not noticed the newspaper coverage, Premier Bolte reminded them in 1958 that his Government closed down emergency housing camps and rehoused 650 families.<sup>257</sup> But still the party demanded more, and in 1958, under the chairmanship of the astute Ivor Greenwood,<sup>258</sup> a committee was set up to examine allegations that policy recommendations were being ignored. In its report presented the following year, Greenwood revisited first principles and sounded a timely warning about the sorry state of affairs into which the old United Australia had slipped; he reminded how Menzies had inaugurated a 'movement', not just a party organisation, in which every member should feel that he or she has the opportunity to influence both policy and organisation. Greenwood was unequivocal about the need to address any oligarchical tendencies.

The impetus of the Party derives from giving the rank and file, democratically chosen, the power of controlling the Party's destiny. It is not unreasonable that, having given liberally of time, energy and fortune the rank and file will expect compliance with policy decisions by those who are the Party's workers in Parliament.<sup>259</sup>

It was, in effect, a moment of organisational crisis for the Liberal Party: was it to be a modern party, genuinely democratic, professional and disciplined, as its founders had intended, or was it to slip back into the old amateurish, gentlemen's club ways of the UAP and suffer a similar political demise? Remnants of the old thinking still infested the modern parliamentary party, as Greenwood noted; some Members of Parliament regarded the State Council as an 'outside body' and 'therefore of no consequence' to MPs, while others regarded the State Council 'as unreasonable and irresponsible in its decisions'.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Liberal Party State Council resolution files 1956-59, UMA.2/1/2.

<sup>255</sup> Parliamentary Party Bulletin No. 15, 21 May 1956, UMA, 2/1/1/4 .

<sup>256</sup> Parliamentary Party Bulletin No 39, 26 March 1957, UMA.2/1/1/4.

<sup>257</sup> Parliamentary Party Bulletin No 61, 25 March 1958, UMA. 2/1/1/4.

<sup>258</sup> Ivor John Greenwood (1926-1976), barrister, later a Senator and Federal Attorney-General.

<sup>259</sup> Report of State Council Resolutions Committee, 1 July 1959, p. 12. UMA. 2/2/1/3.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

The issue was to seek effective ways of ensuring voluntary compliance and, failing that, some resort to sanctions; in any event, Greenwood urged Members of Parliament to ‘become more active in the State Council’ as a means of closing the gap between parliamentary and organisational wings.<sup>261</sup> Just what Bolte thought is not recorded, but a reading of the party’s complaints about policy resolutions not acted upon indicates that the issues of contention were by no means all major, but reflected a striking array of middle-class concerns — the scope and nature of hairdressers’ courses, the law on trap-shooting, provision of parking bays, play centres, a car ferry service, municipal rates, fluoridation of drinking water, gold passes for retired Members of Parliament, the operation and structure of the egg marketing board, firearms regulations, the law relating to landlords and tenants and regulations over the fitting of mud flaps to motor vehicles.<sup>262</sup>

Bolte was always a team player, and liked to see himself as integral to the party on all issues, not outside it; he had learned the lessons only too well of internal conflict and disunity and was determined not to repeat them under his stewardship. Even while the Greenwood committee was investigating the situation, Bolte moved to try to bridge the gap between party wings by taking to the airwaves as a means of explaining the Government’s thinking on key issues. It was a masterful stroke, addressing as it did the concerns of special interest groups but also at the same time, making reference to the political context of the day and the overarching bigger picture — always, in Bolte’s case, the greater economic prosperity of Victoria. At another level, each radio talk was carefully crafted to draw attention to the Government’s work, a government that was constantly toiling for the good of all Victorians, a government that knew no respite. For example, in a talk broadcast over a number of country radio stations on 15 February 1959, Bolte addressed the issue of government policy of Crown land settlement, noting that in 1956 his Government had introduced the Land Improvement Purchase Act, ‘with the object of paving the way for more settlers to secure good Crown land and so add to the rural productivity of the State’. It was not just the Government acting in a vacuum,

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<sup>261</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>262</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

but, he explained, responding to and meeting ‘a long-felt want’. It was in everyone’s interest.

The reclamation of the old mining areas and the settlement on virgin Crown lands go hand in hand with the Government’s unremitting efforts to give more and more impetus to our State’s continuous development and to the still further consolidation of the progress we all enjoy.<sup>263</sup>

In a series of messages directed primarily at his supporters, and especially those in non-urban areas, Bolte signalled quite clearly that quibbling over minor matters was indeed churlish when Victoria under his leadership was prospering as it was. His unsubtle tub-thumping was never more in evidence as in his broadcast on 15 March 1959 relating to improvement of pasture land.

I am never reluctant to emphasise the great wealth that Victoria produces from the land nor am I ever tired of proclaiming with pride what we have accomplished in that direction. That is because here, in Victoria, we have a State that is second to none, either in wealth and diversity of primary production or in expansion of secondary industries.

I am sure you will all share that pride with me because you live and work in this bounteous State and, by doing so, make your personal contribution to its development and its progress. If you are proud of your personal achievements, then you are equally proud of the State as a whole.<sup>264</sup>

It was a most characteristic way of replying to his critics: point to what he had done and was doing, appeal to their pride in Victoria’s progress. The message was clear: you have never had it so good.

Differences, however, were to recur, especially over Bolte’s insistence on the death penalty in two murder cases — the Tait case in 1962 (where the sentence was commuted) and the Ryan case in 1967. Opinion within the Liberal Party was divided as it was in the community. Bolte merely rode out the storm in each case, confident in the knowledge

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<sup>263</sup> Radio Broadcast by the Premier (Hon. H. E. Bolte) over stations 3SH, 3HA, 3NR and 3TR on Sunday February 15<sup>th</sup> 1959, UMA.3/3/22.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

that what the pragmatic Liberals expected most of a leader was electoral success, and he delivered that unfailingly. Similarly, he resisted moves from State Council for the appointment of a State Ombudsman and press officers for all ministers, dismissing the moves as unnecessary on the grounds that MPs should be their own ombudsmen for their electors and that if ministers were on top of their job they did not need press officers.<sup>265</sup>

Bolte did not win all the time, as was shown by his attempt to restructure the powerful Board of Works, a statutory authority, after public criticism over the water restrictions imposed in Melbourne during the 1967 drought and the Board's public request for \$38 m. to build an emergency dam. Stung by the Board's implied criticism of the Government, Bolte told a press conference early in 1968 that he was looking at disbanding the 52-member board and replacing it with a much smaller body under direct ministerial control. Bolte had under-estimated the influence within the parliamentary Liberal party of the 52 members, each of them elected local councillors, and a year after his threat he capitulated.<sup>266</sup>

As a political leader, Bolte was never challenged in all his time at the helm of the party; he expected loyalty and gave it in equal measure. One long-serving colleague said that while Bolte was no dictator, he had strong opinions, and 'if you did the wrong thing by the party...you were dead'.<sup>267</sup> A long-serving Liberal and onetime Independent, Ian McLaren,<sup>268</sup> was often critical of the Bolte style, but admired Bolte's unwavering commitment to his team, saying he was 'always prepared to assist his members, even those he didn't like or agree with'. In McLaren's case, when an unfavourable redistribution threatened his chances, Bolte without being asked, pleaded his case with

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<sup>264</sup> Radio Broadcast 15 March 1959. UMA. 3/3/22.

<sup>265</sup> Former MLA Bill Burns quoted in Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>266</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>267</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>268</sup> Ian Francis McLaren (1912-2000), accountant, MLA (Independent) Glen Iris 1945-47; Liberal Caulfield 1965-67, Bennettswood 1967-79, Deputy Speaker 1973-79.

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the Electoral Commission.<sup>269</sup> Of Bolte's leadership style, McLaren said that he virtually controlled not only the party but also the parliament 'with not so much an iron hand but by the very force of his decision making'.

I think that this is a very necessary factor of a leader, that he must be able to make up his mind, get the concurrence of his supporters, and then carry it out. This is in fact what Henry Bolte did.

I wouldn't say that he was altogether a likeable man in this way. I think that people appreciated the fact that he was able to call a spade a spade and even 'a bloody shovel'. He ruled at that time when I was there in 1965, he ruled the party with a very firm hand. But at the same time he was very active with the members. I've never seen any other leader like him come into the Party Room after lunch or during a meeting of Parliament to talk to the members. This gave members the opportunity of expressing their views.<sup>270</sup>

McLaren was one backbencher unafraid to cross Bolte, and he has recorded how he opposed the Premier towards the end of his rule when he came into the Party Room and announced he planned to introduce a Bill to protect Ansett Transport Industries, the company of his close friend, Sir Reginald Ansett, from takeover. McLaren, along with several other members, was taken by surprise and opposed the move, McLaren suggesting, instead, a Select Committee to examine the issue. The Party Room, one can imagine, must have fallen silent at this piece of audacity. It is instructive in understanding how Bolte operated that he looked at McLaren steadily, and then said quietly: 'Ian, that's a very fine idea'. The outcome was the establishment of a Select Committee with McLaren as chairman,<sup>271</sup> which in effect stalled the takeover and ultimately allowed Ansett to retain control.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Ian McLaren Oral History Interview, National Library of Australia. Interview by Mark Cranfield April 1986 and February 1987, TRC 1969. Transcript page 175. In McLaren's view, Bolte was such a party man that he retained a suspicion of McLaren for having stood and won as an Independent in 1945, the election at which Bolte first stood but failed to get elected. A subsequent Minister, Vernon Wilcox, who had previously stood as an Electoral Reform candidate, made a similar observation.

<sup>270</sup> *ibid.* p. 194.

<sup>271</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>272</sup> Blazey, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-231.

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Not only was Bolte prepared to listen to his party, he also used it as a sounding board for some of his ‘off the cuff lines’ for which he became renowned. Like all public speakers, most of his *ex tempore* lines were both carefully rehearsed and well polished. One such example, which he had tried out on the Party Room beforehand, was his well-publicised quip about the Vietnam War demonstrators (‘they can keep on marching until they have bloody boots’).<sup>273</sup> His hand picked successor, Dick Hamer, remarked at the time of Bolte’s death that while his public persona was one of a firm and direct man and ‘a man of blunt pronouncements’, his approach to Cabinet was quite different: ‘Everyone was free to speak and Henry was willing to listen’.<sup>274</sup>

A man who was to become a senior Minister in the latter half of the Bolte regime, Vernon Wilcox,<sup>275</sup> has recorded how he was elected to Cabinet in 1964 even though Bolte would have preferred someone else — something Wilcox attributed to his tendency to outspokenness in the party room as well as his having stood as an Electoral Reform candidate in 1952.<sup>276</sup> Nearing the end of the parliamentary term, Wilcox went to see Bolte to try to clarify his position.

Henry looked across the desk in his office and said, ‘You’ll be right’.

I said ‘Oh yes, Henry, but you never know with this voting in the party room what happens’.

He looked across the table again and said, ‘Well you know, I’ve got two places to fill’.<sup>277</sup>

When you had a comment like that from Henry it was a commitment, and you knew that it would be carried out. I always thought the fact that, when he made a commitment he carried it out, was one of his greatest attributes.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> McLaren interview, p. 194.

<sup>274</sup> *Age*, 7 January 1990.

<sup>275</sup> Vernon Francis Wilcox (1919-2004) MLA Camberwell 1956-1976; Assistant Chief Secretary, Assistant Attorney-General, Minister for Immigration 1964-65; Assistant Attorney-General, Minister of Labour and Industry 1965-67; Minister of Transport 1967-73; Attorney-General 1973-76.

<sup>276</sup> Vernon Wilcox, *Minister of the Crown: A Personal Story of Life, Politics and People*, V. F. & J. R. Wilcox, Collingwood, 2001.

<sup>277</sup> Under the Victorian rules, the party leader was able to select two ministers.

<sup>278</sup> Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-4.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

The state of affairs of party organisation and parliamentary party, especially its leader, working in reasonably close harmony was a unique experience for the Liberals in Victoria, and its electoral dividends were handsome indeed. This is not to say, however, that there were not reservations from time to time about Bolte's style; but the working arrangements that were set in place under his leadership ensured that he could rely on the loyalty and support of all sections of the party in a way that Hollway could not.<sup>279</sup>

However, the most strenuous and protracted intra-party battle Henry Bolte fought was against his fellow Victorian Liberal who subsequently became Prime Minister, John Gorton. Their political links went back to before the Menzies win in 1949 when Bolte voted in Gorton's pre-selection for the Senate ticket,<sup>280</sup> but they were never close and Bolte seems never to have entertained a favourable opinion of Gorton, whom he regarded as lazy and a centralist.<sup>281</sup> When Gorton was being mooted as Holt's successor after Holt's death in 1967 Bolte and Rylah did nothing to conceal their strong apprehension over the prospect.<sup>282</sup>

After Gorton became Prime Minister in 1968 and Bolte had to deal with him in the tense area of Commonwealth-State relations, especially finance, the already fragile relationship rapidly deteriorated with Bolte accusing him of renegeing on a deal that he had made on which Bolte had framed his State Budget.<sup>283</sup> This and subsequent confrontations turned Bolte into an implacable foe of Gorton's which, within the party, gave him a significant degree of influence outside Victoria as he became a key figure among those intent on bringing down Gorton, which Bolte admitted. The day Gorton was toppled was, to Bolte, 'the best thing that ever happened to the Liberal Party'.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Aimer, *op. cit.*, p. 29; West, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>280</sup> For Bolte's own account of this see Bolte interview, *op. cit.*, 1:2/11.

<sup>281</sup> The author recalls that in his daily press conferences, Bolte made it clear what he thought of Gorton, but as 'off the record' briefings that were not directly reported.

<sup>282</sup> Muir, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>283</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/14-5

<sup>284</sup> *ibid.*, 1:2/17.

### 3.8. The Public Perception

**HENRY** Bolte was to Victorians what Bob Menzies was to Australians everywhere — a fact of life, a seemingly permanent fixture of the political landscape. His paternalistic optimism, and unfeigned enthusiasm for all things Victorian, was so indelibly a part of the postwar prosperity, that he came to personify it in the popular imagination. His identification was such that even a 1960s Melbourne pop group, in a light hearted song favourably comparing Melbourne with Sydney, bestowed popular culture icon status on him, just as it did on football hero Ron Barassi, with the verse

We'd rather live in Melbourne  
Though some folks say it's faulty;  
Sydney's got its strippers,  
But we've got Henry Bolte.  
We've got Australian Rules  
And the Melbourne Cup each year.  
Sydney's girls are way out front,  
But we've got stronger beer.<sup>285</sup>

There was a larrikin side to Bolte that endeared him to many, but it took the growing confidence of office for it to emerge; most notably for many Victorians they saw it in the folksy television campaign broadcasts Bolte made for the 1958 elections which he arranged to have shown on all television channels at the same time, prefaced with his words: 'It's no use switching to another station because I'm on the lot. I've got you'.<sup>286</sup> Political life can be dour and serious, but Bolte managed to inject it with a sense of fun, and he was by no means averse to cocking a snook at stuffiness, as when he defied the rule against fraternising with staff at the Parliamentary Christmas Party for members and staff in 1961, much to the delight of newspaper cartoonists. When someone from the

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<sup>285</sup> 'Melborn and Sideny' by the Idlers Five, CBS Records, 1968.

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House Committee reminded him of the rule, Bolte determined to show what he thought of it, taking the head waitress, Agnes Alderman, in a quick whirl around the ballroom before donning a white coat and serving drinks to other staff.<sup>287</sup> The apparent permanence of Henry Bolte dawned slowly on Victorians and it was only after he had been Premier for 12 years (by then a record term) that the *Age*, a newspaper by no means uncritical towards him, ran a long piece by the journalist John Hetherington under the heading: ‘Who is Henry Bolte?’ The opening paragraphs get to the nub of the man.

A horse carrying Sir Henry Bolte’s red, white and black colors was about to go to the starting post on a Victorian racecourse.

‘Any instructions, sir?’ the jockey asked.

‘Yes,’ said Bolte. ‘There are 500 ways of losing a race and only one of winning it. Let’s get there first!’<sup>288</sup>

It was, Hetherington observed, a ‘fair statement’ of Bolte’s philosophy ‘as a racehorse owner, a private citizen and a politician’. It is very Australian in its directness, its sheer practicality; these were qualities that Bolte displayed to his electorate in his overall approach to issues and events. Never one for abstruse theory or jargon of any kind, Bolte was as plain and direct in his speech as he was in his actions. Hetherington notes in his profile that Bolte’s predecessors had a ‘melancholy record of things started but never finished’.

Bolte will never agree to start something unless he knows he can pay for it. ‘I’ll get cracking when I can see the money to start and finish it economically,’ he says. ‘Not before.’ ministers with grandiose visions have to like it or lump it.<sup>289</sup>

Curiously, it was the Ryan hanging, the last execution in Australia, that excited the greatest interest outside Victoria in Henry Bolte, and a long article in the intellectual

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<sup>286</sup> Quoted in Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 200; Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>287</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 69; cartoon in *Herald*, 7 December 1961.

<sup>288</sup> *Age*, 1 May 1967.

<sup>289</sup> *ibid.*

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magazine *Nation* (most likely written by the journalist George Munster) attempted to probe the Bolte psyche; it was also highly revealing about the way in which the Australian intelligentsia regarded a populist politician like Bolte.

Behind the 'ordinary bloke' image of a smiling farmer that Sir Henry has cultivated, he is a quite extraordinary man. He does not inspire much affection, but everybody knows he's around. He is neither a particularly stupid nor a particularly intelligent man. One might speculate on an I.Q. in the region of 120 – above average, but far from startling – and he could have done with a bit longer at school. He is truly the unimaginative, outdoor sports-loving man. If he had not become a successful farmer, he could well have been a very successful businessman; it is doubtful if he would have had the patience with detail to master a profession.<sup>290</sup>

The author noted a similarity with LBJ, drawing attention to the 'same self-conscious provincial who knows he has made it, the sensitivity to atmosphere and criticism, the difficulties with pressmen, the hints of vulgarity, the complex and contradictory emotions, the sheer ebullient ego and overweening personal pride'. His 'domination over Cabinet' was also noted.

...partly a function of the natural power of a well-entrenched leader, partly a result of his genuine ability in a Cabinet some of whom are barely mediocrities, but it is mostly a consequence of the dominating force of Sir Henry's confidence and will. The system of voteless 'consensus' at Cabinet helps his will to dominate. The more able members of his Cabinet simply do not compare with the Premier in drive or nous.<sup>291</sup>

To those on the other side of the political fence, Bolte was a relentless and even ruthless foe, yet he was highly regarded despite political differences. His long-time opponent, Clive Stoneham, recalled that he had often in private referred to Bolte as 'a real bastard' and even worse, but he never detected malice in the man nor did he ever see Bolte resort to personal politics of any sort (although he did add that Bolte seemed to 'know somewhat more than he needed to know' about his own ministers).

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<sup>290</sup> *Nation*, 11 February 1967.

<sup>291</sup> *ibid.*

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

He was a country bloke like me, and I was comfortable with that sort of directness. But it was not everyone's cup of tea. But he didn't give a damn whether people liked him or not. He was what he always was, and I don't think being Premier for so long changed him in any way at all.<sup>292</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable that Bolte's long reign led to growing criticism that he had become insensitive, indifferent to public opinion, even arrogant. It was the mature, experienced politician who answered when this was put to him, and in his reply revealed some of his own political *modus operandi*.

Public opinion is a secondary consideration...What you believe to be right or wrong comes first – right or wrong in your judgment, that is. It can't be anything else. When you first come into Parliament you are scared of your own shadow. Then, after a few years, you realise that pressure groups don't mean so much. In my early days I would have hesitated over liquor reform, extension of shop hours, and some other things my Government has done, but these measures were introduced and people have accepted them. On any controversial issue there are always extremist minorities which raise a clamor out of all proportion to their numbers or the importance of their views.<sup>293</sup>

Despite criticism in some circles that he still tended to 'reflect the values of the late 1950s',<sup>294</sup> Bolte remained firmly in control and firmly in power. When he celebrated his 6000 days in office in 1971, and put paid to rumours that he was about to retire, he mused on his then 16 years as Premier, reciting his now familiar mantra of always having put Victoria first.

We've nearly a million more people since 1955, and we've managed to provide education, hospitals, roads and jobs. It may not have been perfect, but it's been pretty good...In everyman's terms, I'd say I am proud that employers and employees probably drive the same make of car. And when he opens the boot and pulls out the picnic basket, the employee probably has just as good a hamper as the employer.<sup>295</sup>

It had been a time, he said, of 'great social changes' — extended shopping hours, longer hotel trading hours, availability of petrol at all hours and legal off-course betting as well

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<sup>292</sup> Interview with the Hon Clive Stoneham, Maryborough, Vic., 21 September, 1988. (Interview was in connection with an article the author was writing for the *Age*).

<sup>293</sup> *Age*, 1 May 1967.

<sup>294</sup> *Australian Financial Review*, 5 May 1972.

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as the abolition of slum housing. By the time he finally stepped down in 1972, the years of his rule were already dubbed the 'Bolte era', and his achievements were well documented in the public mind. It was the former Liberal Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, who most succinctly summed up the Bolte success formula, defining at the same time the image of Bolte the public man.

When he became leader of the Liberal Party there were probably very few who thought that he would last for many years of unbroken success. I have frequently thought about what might be the reasons for that success, and keep coming up with the same answer, that he was himself an average man with an uncommon faculty for communicating to average men; not from a lofty position but from one of equality with them. His educational advantages were comparatively limited, but Australians have always had some suspicion of academics in the political field and like the spectacle of a man who speaks plainly and in terms which they readily understand. It is in this sense that I use the word 'average'.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> *Age*, 9 November 1971.

<sup>296</sup> The Rt Hon Sir Robert Menzies in foreword to Muir, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

### 3.9. The Bolte Legacy

**BY THE** time of Henry Bolte's death at 81 in 1990, his era had receded into the distant past. The Liberal Government continued in office for another decade after Bolte's retirement, but began to falter in the 1970s as it sought to grapple with new issues and meet different expectations. Bolte's successor, Dick Hamer, was driven from office by sections of his own party and Lindsay Thompson became Premier only when the Liberal star was well on the wane. A rejuvenated Labor Party under John Cain, son of Bolte's old adversary, surged into office in 1982 and won two subsequent elections as the Liberals struggled to find relevance. To more and more observers, the Bolte era seemed as remote in time as it was in mood; to those who came to political awareness after 1972, Bolte himself seemed a relic of another age entirely. In retrospect, the unending economic sunshine of the Bolte era took on the aura of a remembered summer afternoon from childhood: secure, timeless and uncomplicated. By 1990, great changes had taken place in the Australian economy; the prosperity of the postwar years had given way to a new uncertainty, and even the Liberal Party appeared to be drifting: out of office in both Victoria and Canberra, and uncertain about leadership and policy in both arenas where once titans had ruled. The *Herald* in Melbourne, a paper that once strongly supported Bolte and was now itself headed for extinction,<sup>297</sup> nicely captured the contrast between Bolte and the modern era in a valedictory editorial headed 'A great Victorian'.

Sir Henry Bolte was a politician and a Premier of the old school. No consensus politics for him. He was stubborn, often irascible, reactionary, a Liberal and a leader to the boot straps, yet there was always the feeling that whatever happened, his vision of what Victoria should be was his driving force...Yet he was a man for his time who left enduring monuments. The Arts Centre, the West Gate Bridge, the TAB, extended hotel hours, two new universities...<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> It closed in 1991.

<sup>298</sup> *Herald*, 5 January 1990.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

Bolte the stayer had proved a rarity in politics, and not just by his longevity; the manner of his going and his carefully arranged transition to a new leader was nothing short of remarkable in its contemporary context. Unusual in political life, he shared with Menzies the distinction of making his exit at a time and of a manner of his choosing. Bolte was sufficiently a realist to see that times were changing, and that his successor had to be a man of a quite different stamp in Hamer, a man who liked to talk about the 'quality of life' and emphasise the importance of environmental issues in the political agenda. Of his departure, Bolte was characteristically blunt.

I had had a fortunate life in politics and I thought 17 years as Premier was enough. Overriding all of that, of course, I thought I was getting to the stage where I could be a liability to the Liberal Party.<sup>299</sup>

Bolte, almost a decade after his retirement, was asked by a journalist in Adelaide what he attributed his loyal following in Victoria to, and he put it down to his ability to relate to people.

There's no recipe for that – maybe it's native cunning, maybe it's mixing with people. I have not lived removed and have not been remote from people...I have been a good mixer and would mix with all levels of society and, surely unless you're a complete nut, you must be able to assess what people are thinking.<sup>300</sup>

Bolte's star was shining in the heyday of Liberal Australia, when whole generations of post-war Australians sought their place in the economic sunlight; he understood their aspirations and spoke their language, as few Liberals had done before him. The age that followed his retirement was a perplexing one for Bolte, and he often wondered aloud if elected politicians were not as close to the people as they might be; what he emphatically had no time for was the emerging trend of consensus politics — a tag that might aptly apply to his successor, Hamer, as it did later to Hawke at the Federal level.

I believe governments should be doing things ahead of this so-called consensus – without expressing it. That's what people want...

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<sup>299</sup> Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>300</sup> *Advertiser* (Adelaide) 10 October 1981.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Bolte*

If you are going to wait for demand, I think you will be defeated before you have a chance of doing it.<sup>301</sup>

It may well be a part of his legacy that those who immediately followed him — Hamer, Snedden and Fraser — were seen to be timid in this respect; the next generation — Kennett and Howard — were adamantly not. Bolte's legacy, suitably modified, lives on.

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<sup>301</sup> *ibid.*

## 4. ASKIN: THE EMERGENCE OF A LEADER

4.1 From the Other Side of the Tracks

4.2 'I'll Nominate that Man'

4.3 Another Leader, Another Loss

4.4 1959: The Wind Shifts

4.5 Courting the Catholic Vote

4.6 Victory at Last

4.7 The Public Askin

4.8 The Private Askin

#### 4.1. From the Other Side of the Tracks

**WITH A** lively war behind him and safely resettled into a career with promising prospects, Robin William Askin entered political life in 1950 at the age of 43 with a clear ambition: to become leader of the Liberal Party as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> Askin's background was as atypical of a Liberal leader as Treatt's was typical. Born in Sydney in 1907, the young Askin left the city when his father changed his occupation from sailor to work on the railways, the family moving to Stuart Town to live with relatives. When he changed again, to tram driver, the family moved back to Sydney, settling in inner-city Glebe, where the young Askin remained until he married at 29 and moved to Manly. A transport strike in 1917, in which his father was involved, led to the family being evicted from their home and the young Askin and his father slept for a night in Wentworth Park.<sup>2</sup> Glebe was an industrial part of the city, and the expectations were that the young man would learn a trade, attending after Glebe Public School the Glebe Technical School and, after winning a bursary, the Sydney Technical High School.

I think I had the same ambition as the big majority of boys who grew up in a working-class district like Glebe of becoming a tradesman of some kind, perhaps a fitter and turner, electrical engineer, train driver; all that kind of thing was the customary aspiration of young boys and people getting ready to go to work from working-class districts. Actually when I did start work I started off as an apprentice electrical engineer, but I didn't last very long at that.<sup>3</sup>

He was a conscientious student, excelling at mathematics and history, and generally ranking in the top ten of a class of around 40. But his great love was sport, especially rugby league, which he played at school, after school, and later as an adult at weekends. By then, however, he had become a bank officer, and it was bank policy that employees

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<sup>1</sup> This was the view of John Carrick, general secretary of the Liberal Party in NSW 1948-1971. Interview with author, Sydney, 24 May 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Steketee & Milton Cockburn, *Wran: An Unauthorised Biography*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986, p. 265.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

playing football (and league was professional) must play as amateurs, which later served Askin in good stead as he became closely involved in swimming, serving at one stage on the executive of the New South Wales Swimming Association for which membership was barred for people who had played professional sport. Passing up the money had not been easy and, as it was, he had gravitated into a white collar job at the then Government Savings Bank of New South Wales after beginning work as an apprentice electrical engineer, but his father was unable to afford the bond of £200 (\$400). The Depression hit the Askin family as it did most Australian families. A brother, also employed in the bank, lost his job altogether, and young Bob Askin was reduced to work on a month-on month-off basis — effectively on half pay, and the family income was tight. He would walk to the city from Glebe to save on fares, and often called into the municipal library on the way home to feed a growing need ‘to try and improve myself’. In his spare time he sought casual work and odd jobs, working occasionally on the wharves and even doing some freelance writing, his casual journalism appearing in *Smith’s Weekly* and a short story in *The Bulletin*. It was a widening world that brought in a few extra shillings and increased the social horizons, a useful experience for a future politician who was already learning that he was a good mixer.

I think this was one of my main attributes. I didn’t have any particular educational qualifications or any other outstanding attributes in my opinion, but I was a good mixer; I understood people and understood what made the bulk of them tick and what they hoped for; I think I understood that and addressed my politics accordingly. I’d had a rather mixed life before I went into politics. I used to think of myself before I got into politics that I’d wasted a lot of time. For instance, I was mixed up in all these sports. I was on the Swimming Association...I was on the football committee, I was president of the Rural Bank Officers’ Association, helped to draw up their awards and all this kind of thing; and anything that was started I was always asked to be secretary or president and I went into all sorts of things, mixed with everybody and got mixed up with all sorts of activities, even joined a chess club.<sup>4</sup>

The more the young Askin mixed, the more he became involved; without trying he was soon patron of the local rifle club at Manly, patron of the swimming club and also a swimming judge. It certainly got him thinking, particularly as he came to realise that

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sir Robert Askin by Mel Pratt, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 7 and 11 October 1976, Oral TRC 121/83, 1:1/2.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/7-8.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

while he had a reasonably good career at the bank, he was not going to get to the top. He was being led, inexorably, into politics, and his gregarious nature and community involvement seemed to point the way.

All these things were tremendously helpful in politics. It meant I had a sort of reserve voting strength, and I was able to apply that outside my electorate and all over the State, or I tried to, and project myself as a cove that liked a game of football, had played a bit without being particularly good, that had been in the Army without having been a big shot, that had given a bit of service, that had been mixed up in all kinds of sport, that liked a glass of beer without going to excess. And in other words I identified myself with the likes and likings of the average Australian, and I think this stood to me several times when the fortunes of political life weren't veering my way.<sup>5</sup>

The community involvement coupled with his upbringing and family environment, and especially his work for the bank officers' association, a registered trade union, could easily have led him into the Labor Party, a possibility he once admitted. He had grown up in a Labor household, his unionist father was a Labor supporter, and most of his circle supported the ALP; an uncle even ran an election campaign for Labor luminary Jack Beasley.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many of his friends were surprised that when he entered politics it was not as a Labor man, but experience had persuaded him otherwise, especially in regard to public finance and Lang's threatened repudiation of interest payments to bondholders.<sup>7</sup>

Askin's first real involvement with political life came in 1937 when a workmate at the bank asked him to help a friend who was running as an Independent for the Federal Parliament. Asking who he was and being told it was Percy Spender,<sup>8</sup> Askin, who had heard of him, agreed to help. That initial involvement was subsequently intensified during his later war service in the Army where he became friendly with the colonel of his battalion, Murray Robson,<sup>9</sup> a city solicitor who was also a State Member of Parliament,

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/8.

<sup>6</sup> John Albert Beasley (1895-1949) ALP (later Lang Labor) MHR West Sydney 1928-46.

<sup>7</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/10.

<sup>8</sup> Percy Claude Spender (1897-1985) Independent UAP, later UAP, even later Liberal MHR Warringah 1937-51. Spender in 1937 was not so much a non-party Independent as an unendorsed UAP candidate. He was running against Sir Archdale Parkhill, then Minister for Defence in the Lyons Government. Parkhill had held the seat for 10 years until toppled by Spender at the 1937 election.

<sup>9</sup> Ewan Murray Robson (1906-1974) MLA Vaucluse 1937-57.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

who encouraged his further interest.<sup>10</sup> It was a fortuitous meeting in the lives of both men as later events were to prove.

It was at the same time as his initial involvement in politics that Askin married Mollie Underhill, a keen swimmer who lived at Manly and wanted to stay in the area. The newlyweds first lived in a flat at Cremorne Point as ‘a staging place’ until suitable accommodation in Manly became available. The Glebe of Askin’s youth had paled in his eyes; it was ‘retrogressing pretty fast, it was becoming backward as a suburb’.<sup>11</sup> Another of his activities was the Militia, and he sought and studied for a commission ‘to get out of Saturday drills’, which meant he was able to play football on Saturdays and do night drills instead. But there were complications with the bank when war broke out as he eagerly sought to be near the action.

When the war broke out I was anxious to get into something fairly early, even though I was married. But the bank took the view that – by this time, of course, I was a little bit older than the average fellow that was wanting to, I was in the thirties, I was wanting to get away and I was a fairly senior officer compared to most people that were going to the war – and the bank had sort of got them into categories and anybody above a certain salary or who was married and had a job with a certain status, they were placed in Group 4 or something like that, and you had to wait your turn... So I had to wait quite a while and eventually in 1941 I got in, and no sooner I was in than the Federal Government at the time said: ‘We’ve got more men than we can handle.’ So the bank pulled some of us out, but then we got in again a few months later on.<sup>12</sup>

Because of his age, Askin was told he would not be posted to a combat unit, so he withdrew his application for a commission. He was initially involved in training troops at Bathurst and complained bitterly that he had not joined the Army to spend the war there; he was eventually posted as a reinforcement to the Middle East, but diverted to New Guinea because of the threat posed by the Japanese advance. His desire to see active service meant he went away as a private.

I was over the age for the Infantry...They had fixed an age limit of 27 for lieutenants and 30 for captains and I was...34 and well over the age and they said that I could have my rank as an officer but I would be in a non-combatant unit....So the only way I could get away was to go away as a private, and when I got away in the 2<sup>nd</sup> 31<sup>st</sup> I was well over the

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<sup>10</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/10.

<sup>11</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/12.

<sup>12</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/14.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

age, of course, it was an Infantry battalion...it was made clear to me that I'd never get any rank, but I got as far as sergeant, which gave me certain privileges at the sergeants' mess and I was quite contented there.<sup>13</sup>

At first, Askin's age and banking background saw him allocated to the pay office and later the canteen, but when action came he was in the thick of it, seeing active service in both the New Guinea and Borneo campaigns. Askin also ran the two-up school in his unit and took bets on the races; it was said he finished the war with a tidy little nest egg from his gambling activities.<sup>14</sup> At war's end, men were returned home by lot, and the luck of the draw saw Askin still in Borneo six months after hostilities ended, where he briefly turned his hand to some commercial trading activity in Banjarmasin.<sup>15</sup> It was here he resumed contact with Robson whom he had first met while working on the Spender campaign back in 1937.

In order to keep the fellows in camp and keep them interested when things were a bit slack and nothing much doing, it devolved on the commander to get things going like boxing, and one of the things he promoted was a debating club. And I'd done a little bit of this...and he said to me jokingly one evening after the debate had finished... 'Have you ever thought of going into politics?' I told him I had thought of it, but only in a very loose way. And he said: 'Come and talk to me after the war'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/15.

<sup>14</sup> *The Bulletin*, 22 September 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Radi, Spearritt & Hinton, *op.cit.*, p. 9. The trading enterprise foundered when a waterfront strike in Australia prevented the goods from leaving Australia. (*Australian*, 10 September 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/17.

#### 4.2. 'I'll Nominate that Man'

**IT WAS** one of those remarks that are not always taken literally; in any case, Askin was trying, like all demobilised service people, to fit back into civilian life and come to terms with the changes that had taken place while they were away. A certain amount of reorganisation at the bank, now the Rural Bank, saw him back at work in March 1946, this time posted to the bank's rural reconstruction branch. He had not lost out by being away as the bank gave him 'a good hefty rise in salary' to make up for the army service. Yet like many in his position he would later admit to a nagging suspicion at the time that the promised brave new world of the post-war era was not eventuating, that there was feeling of purposelessness.<sup>17</sup> Early the following year, he walked out of the bank building in Sydney one lunch time and met Robson, by this time back in civilian life as a Member of Parliament, and they went for a beer and a chat which led to Robson's asking him to campaign for him in the forthcoming State election in 1947; Askin was 'in the mood to agree'. It began as routine stuff, such as helping to address envelopes and doing office work at night and at week-ends, but he was later asked to 'do a little bit of speaking from the back of a truck when the speaker who was supposed to be coming didn't turn up'. Robson, who held the seat of Vaucluse, suggested Askin join the Liberal Party where he lived at Manly, which he did.

So I went down to the next Manly branch meeting...and attended a few meetings, had a bit to say; I'd had a bit of experience of meetings, which gave me a chance, it was rather a quiet sort of branch. And the next year, about a year afterwards, it was a very wet night, which kept a lot of the elderly people away, the president sent word – he was a retired police inspector – that he didn't want to run for office, and they couldn't get anybody to run for president. It meant a bit of work. I remember one dear old lady pointing to me and she said: 'I'll nominate that man'. She didn't know my name, but she'd heard me speak once or twice. So that's how I found myself as president of the Manly branch.<sup>18</sup>

Later on in the same year, there was a routine electoral redistribution to take account of population shifts and a new seat called Collaroy was formed, part of it incorporating

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<sup>17</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/20.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

Manly, and with the north stretching up to Palm Beach which had formerly been in the Gordon electorate. Several people in the party urged him, as president of the Manly branch, to nominate for pre-selection, but he was initially reluctant because he had settled back to life at the bank in a good job with reasonable prospects, superannuation and good conditions against which politics looked ‘a pretty hazardous business’.<sup>19</sup> He discussed the idea with Mollie who said she would support whatever he decided so he threw his hat into the ring, as did 20 other contenders, and Askin won on the first ballot. The bank was also accommodating, offering to keep his job open until the following election, a gesture Askin interpreted as the bank’s desire ‘to have a friend at court’. Despite its being a safe Liberal seat, Askin took no risks, taking leave in the run up to the election and canvassing the area, which paid off with a handsome majority of more than 5,000. His election brought a certain pattern to his life, as he was later to reflect.

I found everything that I had been doing, the multifarious activities that I’d been connected with in my earlier life, not having been much good at any of them, but having participated and achieved some prominence in some of them, but not getting to the top in everything – but this was the one activity, politics, where everything that I’d been engaged in fell into its part and was useful. And there wasn’t anything that I’d been mixed up in that didn’t turn out to be useful politically, and I think I had enough shrewdness, if I can say that, to use these things for my own political purposes. Not in any reprehensible way, of course, but I used to make a point of going along to meetings and airing my knowledge about things, talking about things in a language that the people listening would say, ‘Oh, this fellow knows what he’s talking about’, even if I hadn’t been very prominent.<sup>20</sup>

The worldly ex-sergeant took his place in the new parliament alongside the men who each sought, in their own way, to further the elaborate expectations that had accumulated in the post-war world. Late in the evening of 26 September, Askin rose to deliver his maiden speech — a confident, assured presentation that not only massaged his electorate but expressed his concerns for the average man and woman and what was on their minds; quite subtly, he also placed himself firmly in their milieu. He noted how hopes were raised in McGirr’s 1947 policy speech that sewerage reticulation would be provided to every Sydney metropolitan home.

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<sup>19</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/20.

<sup>20</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/22.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

My constituents are still hoping. I shall have much to say on this subject in the days that lie ahead, and will present statistics showing why the Collaroy electorate unquestionably should be placed high on the priority list for sewerage reticulation.<sup>21</sup>

He touched on a shortage of schools and overcrowding in classrooms, and was critical of public transport in the electorate, especially proposed fare increases, the burden of which would fall most unfairly on those ‘from the humbler strata of society and who cannot afford to run cars or hire taxis’. He went on to talk about the work of the Surf Life Saving Association, its volunteer structure and the importance of the function it performed, noting that since 1938 there had been ‘a huge increase in the cost of reels, surf boats and all other equipment associated with surf life saving, just as costs generally have increased’. It was time to review the grant structure, still based on 1938 costs. Turning to broader national issues, Askin identified the ‘most urgent of our national problems’ as Communism and inflation, with particular emphasis on the latter as to how it impacted on the ordinary household. Askin expressed his hope for improvements in employer-employee relations, and wound up with a discussion of various viewpoints as to what constituted the ‘backbone of the country’.

One constantly hears some particular section of the community referred to as the backbone of the nation. Already in this session I have heard hon. Members refer to certain sections of the working class as the backbone of the country.

In the last few days I have heard hon. Members from both sides of the House refer to woolgrowers as the backbone of the country, some have said that it is the armed forces, and so forth. The backbone of the country is not an isolated section, but the whole of the eight million men, women and children who make up its population. The closer the various sections are welded together the better it will be for our country. Anyone who works towards any other end renders a very serious disservice to Australia.<sup>22</sup>

It was in a sense a clarion call to his own side, a message that the Liberal Party would ignore at its peril; it echoed the call of Menzies a few years earlier for the Liberal Party to be a party for all. It was aimed at the conservative wing of his party as much as

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<sup>21</sup> *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, 36<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, Vol 194, 26 September 1950, p. 358.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 361-2.

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anywhere, and the thinking behind it was clear: the road to power was not a sectional road; it had to be based on an appeal that cut across the traditional political and social fault lines. Within it, and in its mixture of homely and national issues, was the credo that would drive Askin for the next two decades. What it most certainly was not was the speech of a Liberal silvertail.

An energetic man with war service and deep roots in the community, Askin was typical of the sort of men the Liberals were trying to recruit as candidates. Carrick, as party general secretary, had no hand in Askin's recruitment but he liked what he saw - 'a young sergeant...a young man with tremendous aptitude and ambition'.<sup>23</sup> Askin, for his part, took a long and critical look at his new surroundings and its denizens; unlike many of his colleagues, however, he took a liking to the remote figure of Treatt which in no way blinded him to the shortcomings he perceived, among them an equanimity which even the tyro politician saw as somehow quaint and old-fashioned in a modern day political leader.

[I] liked him and admired him...he had a very erudite mind, well read, very articulate and very fair...But he was a lawyer, he was a QC. There's always a 'but', I suppose, with all of us, and Vernon's big weakness was...like most lawyers he always saw both sides, and he found great difficulty in making up his mind in determined fashion one way or the other...And this is the way of many lawyers, they present all the facts and both sides of the case instead of setting a lead, hard-hitting lead for the troops to follow. I think this was his biggest weakness...<sup>24</sup>

**Table 7. Comparison of Liberals elected in NSW 1947-53**

	War service	Officer	Priv school	University	Professional	Self-empl	White collar
<b>Askin</b>	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Other 15</b>	8/15	5/15	3/15	6/15†	5/15	7/15	3/15*

\* Other white collar includes two teachers and a research officer

† One completed law articles equivalent to university.

Source: Derived from information in Radi, Heather, Peter Spearritt and Elizabeth Hinton. *Biographical Register of the New South Wales Parliament 1901-1970*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/25-6.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

The extent to which Askin was atypical may be seen in the above table. Seven of the 16 new members elected 1947-53 were self-employed businessmen or primary producers, and five were professionals comprising two lawyers, a medical practitioner, an engineer and an accountant. Of the three other white collar workers (Askin was a bank officer), two had university degrees. Nine of the 16 had seen service in World War II and of these, five had been officers. From the information available,<sup>25</sup> Askin appears to be one of only three members of the group to have come from a working class background, based on father's occupation.<sup>26</sup> Of the rest of the group of 16, six came from a small business or self-employed background, three lower middle-class white collar (clerk, customs officer, insurance inspector), one a farmer, one a policeman, one a lawyer and one a minister of religion.

The Labor Party, meanwhile, took stock of itself after the narrow win which saw it having to rely for a majority on the votes of two 'rebel' members<sup>27</sup> who had run and won without endorsement. McGirr was increasingly seen as a liability, and in 1952, 'ailing and discredited',<sup>28</sup> he was replaced by Cahill,<sup>29</sup> a very different type of politician and a far more formidable foe. Nicknamed the 'Old Smoothie',<sup>30</sup> Cahill was a devout Catholic, a strong leader, skilled administrator and gifted politician; no more would the Government be chastised for wasteful spending on lavish projects that remained unfinished, and a discipline that had waned under McGirr was restored to Cabinet. Moreover, his consummate political skills ensured that Labor in New South Wales, alone of all the branches, did not split in the 1950s crisis over communism and risk any erosion of Labor's traditional Catholic base of support in the State.<sup>31</sup> What this of course meant

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<sup>25</sup> Information based on incomplete records in Radi, Spearritt and Hinton, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Askin's father was a seaman and later a tram driver. McCaw's father was a teamster and Willis's a factory hand.

<sup>27</sup> Seiffert in Monaro and Geraghty in North Sydney.

<sup>28</sup> David Clune, 'The 1953 Election' in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>29</sup> John Joseph Cahill (1891-1959), Labor MLA St George 1925-30, Arncliffe 1930-1932, 1935-1941, Cooks River 1941-59. Minister for Public Works 1941-52, Minister for Local Government 1944-53, Deputy Premier 1949-52, Premier and Treasurer 1952-59, Minister for Transport 1953.

<sup>30</sup> The name was bestowed, reportedly, for Cahill's skills in riding out and surviving the split in NSW. See Robert Murray, *The Split: Australian Labor in the Fifties*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> Clune, 'The 1953 Election', *op. cit.*, pp. 300-2.

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for the Liberals, and for Treatt as leader, was the realisation that the great opportunity in 1950 had been lost and that the task was now commensurably more difficult with McGirr gone. Few close to the action had any doubts about the ongoing frictions inside the Government,<sup>32</sup> but Treatt simply lacked the political skills to turn the Government's problems into political capital for the Liberals. Even in the Legislative Assembly, where the Government's numbers remained tenuous, Treatt was unable to exercise tactical supremacy, especially so in the case of one of the Independents, Geraghty, who was inclined to vote against the Government on certain issues.<sup>33</sup> It was political intrigue at its keenest as the newcomer Askin experienced it.

It was wonderful training to see what happened there because Mr Geraghty, of course, was a publican and as you can imagine, he liked some refreshments at times. And when the Labor Party wanted to make sure he wouldn't be able to vote on a certain issue, if they felt he was likely to go against them, they made sure that he had plenty of refreshments. A lot of manoeuvring took place in that Parliament, 1950 to 1953.<sup>34</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted when Cahill succeeded to the Premiership that Labor 'had been maintaining a precarious hold on office, when firm government is needed to deal effectively with multiplying economic troubles and threats of industrial strife'.<sup>35</sup> Askin, for one, saw the need for stronger leadership and acknowledged that Cahill provided it — a key factor along with the Federal Coalition's 'horror Budget' that year which saw Cahill returned with a landslide.<sup>36</sup> It was a disaster for the Liberals, and a result that sealed Treatt's fate; the Liberals, so close in 1950, saw their vote fall from 37.51 per cent to a miserable 27.94 per cent, almost half of that of Labor's near record 55.02 per cent.<sup>37</sup> In terms of seats won, Labor had 57, Liberals 22 and Country Party 14.

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<sup>32</sup> In the government that Cahill inherited, there were deep divisions in Cabinet and a restive Caucus. McGirr was also at loggerheads with the ALP Executive over its withdrawal of endorsement from four MLAs for the 1950 election. (Clune, 'The 1953 Election', *op. cit.*, p. 303).

<sup>33</sup> One such case was the announcement by the Government of public fare increases in September, 1950, which Geraghty declared he would not vote for in protest against the retention of the toll fare for the Harbour Bridge, greatly resented in his North Sydney electorate. The Opposition attempted to move an urgency motion criticising the increases, and Geraghty abstained; but the Government easily carried the vote because four Opposition members were absent.

<sup>34</sup> Askin interview, 1/1:24.

<sup>35</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1952.

<sup>36</sup> Askin interview, 1/1:24.

<sup>37</sup> Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

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Askin, alone of the members on his side of the house, managed to actually increase his majority in the face of the record swing – a fact he attributed to sheer hard work, including not missing a meeting of the local progress associations.

I was out every night. I'd sometimes do two meetings in the one night and I'd have no time to myself. I set up an office of my own – they didn't have them in those days, they've got them now, it's commonplace – but I set up an office where I saw people from 9 to 11 every Saturday morning, then I'd go to a surf carnival or something like that in the summer months.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the editorial plea by the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Treatt deserved his chance,<sup>39</sup> he was never in the race; Cahill's astute stewardship breathed a new vitality into the Government. Not only had he managed to convey a confident and positive image in a way that McGirr had not been able to, he effectively exploited the Federal Government's unpopularity. Always a careful and a shrewd political operator, Cahill oversaw a decisive shift away from the McGirr style of 'promise 'em everything' towards one 'more in tune with the conservatism and materialism of the increasingly prosperous 1950s'.<sup>40</sup> It was a lesson Askin absorbed better than most.

The sense of frustration in the Liberal Party after the narrow result in 1950 quickly turned to despair after the rout of 1953. The Liberal Party's chief strategist, John Carrick, said it was doubly galling that the Liberals were so successful at the Federal level; in New South Wales, at that time, it was 'pretty miserable'.<sup>41</sup> Treatt had now lost three elections in a row, and his days were clearly numbered as several branches moved motions expressing no-confidence in his leadership, seen by some as a move orchestrated by head office,<sup>42</sup> an allegation which Carrick vehemently denied.<sup>43</sup> It was still not considered the 'done thing' for the Liberal Party to replace a leader simply for not winning elections, and members

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<sup>38</sup> Askin interview, 1/1:25.

<sup>39</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 1953.

<sup>40</sup> Clune, 'The 1953 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>41</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>42</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>43</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002; correspondence with author, 1 June 2002.

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seized on an aspect of Treatt's private life<sup>44</sup> to mount a whispering campaign against him. In April, 1954, a member informed him that a majority within the parliamentary party felt he ought to resign. On 4 May, a meeting of the party ended in a deadlock between Treatt and his challenger, Morton.<sup>45</sup> Treatt survived following pledges of support, but it was a hollow victory indeed, ushering in a round of leadership instability that was farcical in the extreme and further dampened the already low party morale. The next move was triggered by the deputy leader, Howarth,<sup>46</sup> announcing he was stepping down because he did not have the Leader's confidence, leading to another ballot on 6 July when Treatt and Morton again tied at 11-all in the first ballot, with Treatt retaining the leadership by a single vote in the second ballot. Less than a month later, Treatt resigned.<sup>47</sup> It was a messy business for the party; although the Morton camp had made Treatt's leadership untenable, it had not been able to organise majority support for Morton.<sup>48</sup> Within the camp supporting Treatt, among whom was numbered Askin, there was no broad agreement on who should carry the flag after Treatt; Robson, the popular choice, was adamant that he would not run.<sup>49</sup> There was a feeling that the running should not be left to Morton, and with Robson a declared non-contender, attention turned to Askin, still a relative newcomer. He was still unsure of the level of support he could command, but assured those around him that he could make it a close contest. Some, however, remained unconvinced. It was Robson who stilled the doubters, saying: 'Look, I served with Bob in the Army, and if he says he can go very close I think you'll find he can. And he's much more optimistic than anybody else; we'd better give him a go'.<sup>50</sup>

On 10 August the Liberals met to try to resolve the impasse, but imbroglio quickly turned into fiasco when four successive ballots ended in dead-heats with Morton and Askin tying on 11 votes apiece. Askin even suggested that the issue be resolved by a draw from

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<sup>44</sup> Treatt had employed on his staff a woman with whom he was involved after a period of domestic unhappiness.

<sup>45</sup> Philip Henry Morton (1910-1997) MLA Mosman 1947-72, Leader of the Opposition 1956-59, Minister for Local Government and Highways 1965-72.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Arthur Harrex Howarth (1882-1958), MLA Maitland 1932-56, Deputy Leader 1946-54.

<sup>47</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>49</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/27.

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a hat; Morton declined. Some members asked Treatt to withdraw his resignation, but he declined to do so.

I have quite made up my mind that it is impossible for me to carry on with things as they are.... I am quite satisfied that it is best for the State and for the party that we should elect someone who can draw us all together for a fight against the common enemy.<sup>51</sup>

With the Liberal Party, and along with it the Opposition, left leaderless, some of Treatt's supporters said they would again try to have him change his mind before the next meeting, a week hence. The situation of a leadership vacuum was thought to be unprecedented in New South Wales political history.<sup>52</sup> Askin, while not winning the ballot, had clearly signalled two things that would be remembered by his colleagues: his undisguised leadership ambition and his ability to play the political numbers game. As he was later to recall, the numbers were simply not there for the Treatt camp, and he had 'done a little bit of wheeling and dealing'<sup>53</sup> to garner support in the first ballot, which saw him receive the preferences of the two candidates eliminated, Howarth and Darby.<sup>54</sup> In a last minute bid to salvage something from the chaos, Askin urged Robson to nominate, saying: 'There is one man in this room who can command an overwhelming majority'. Robson, however, declined to nominate. It was a black day for the Liberals and the *Sydney Morning Herald* was far from amused as it fulminated against the divisions, calling for a rebuilding of the party from the ground up.

Yesterday's failure of the State Parliamentary Liberal Party to choose a successor to Mr Vernon Treatt came as a regrettable and damaging anti-climax. A political party, or any considerable section of it, which so far wavers in support of its existing leader as to impel him to offer his resignation, ought to have an alternative very clearly in mind. It should be sure that it has a better man for the job, or at least a man capable of commanding more loyal backing than, for a variety of reasons, Mr Treatt had latterly been able to secure.

Proceedings yesterday made it painfully clear that the Liberal Party had no such outstanding choice available. It showed itself no less divided about the selection of a

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<sup>50</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/28.

<sup>51</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1954.

<sup>52</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1954; West, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>53</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/28.

<sup>54</sup> Evelyn Douglas Darby (1910-1985) Liberal MLA Manly 1945-62; Independent 1962-65; Liberal 1966-78.

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successor to Mr Treatt than in its allegiance to him., The dissident group had made Mr Treatt's position untenable, but could not enlist enough support for its own nominee.<sup>55</sup>

For those wedded to the ideals of the modern Liberal Party, the whole situation smacked strongly of a reversion to the bad old days with the parliamentary wing and organisational wing locked in constant struggle and conflict. As the *Herald's* political correspondent noted, it had brought into the open 'deep-rooted and long-standing differences' on who should control the Parliamentary party — the leader or the State executive.<sup>56</sup>

The report contrasted the two main contenders, noting that 'the personalities of the two men...are as dissimilar as their backgrounds...'

Mild-mannered, quietly efficient and a fluent, hard-hitting speaker, Mr Askin was for 27 years on the staff of the Rural Bank. He is a former president of the Rural Bank Officers' Association...Phillip Henry Morton, 44, has been Member for Mosman since 1947...Forceful, fast-talking, and supremely confident, he started in 1925 as the office boy of the automotive spare parts manufacturing company of which he is now director.<sup>57</sup>

The article drew attention to the Liberals' declining electoral fortunes under Treatt, and observed that Morton was among those members who were 'disgruntled and disappointed'; further, it quoted Morton as having said publicly on a number of occasions that he did not want to become a member of a 'permanent State Opposition'. The report also levelled accusations from un-named party members that the State President, Lyle Moore, and the 'Ash Street junta'<sup>58</sup> had tried to dominate Treatt and dictate the tactical moves and policy of the parliamentary party. Moore was stung into a reply, writing in a

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<sup>55</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1954.

<sup>56</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1954.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Carrick has always denied there was any such entity, and has rejected any suggestions that he was part of a 'junta'. Responding to questions about it, he wrote: 'I could have written a book on the search for the "junta", a pursuit that most of the media gave up many years ago...There was never any length of time when the composition of any of the structures was sufficiently stable to establish and sustain a "junta" or when the hugely diverse self-interests would have permitted it to survive...I strove genuinely for virtually all the activities of the Party to be transparent. Academics were encouraged to view our pre-selections and State Council, to work within the office for a period and to talk privately to any party member. The structure of the party (with 48,000 branch members and almost 500 active branches) was so diverse and

letter published the following day that ‘no such struggle exists’, and that it was ‘mischievous nonsense’ to suggest that such was the case.<sup>59</sup> The tensions that did exist — and there were very real tensions — had their origins in two not unrelated causes: one was the reluctance of some members, Treatt among them, to accept the idea of a disciplined modern party structure; the other was increasing frustration at the lack of electoral success in New South Wales, especially in comparison with the Federal Liberals.

With another vote looming, and all indications pointing to an embarrassing repeat of the fiasco, Liberal Party headquarters contacted Askin and asked him if he would be prepared to step down from the contest; his reply was that he would if Robson would run. In a party conspicuously lacking in political savvy, Askin went to work, far more confident than Robson of victory in a contest with Morton, and ‘great pressure was put on a couple of people’.<sup>60</sup> In an exhibition of political shrewdness that would not have been lost on his colleagues, Askin effectively promoted his former commanding officer to the leadership and at the same time, engineered his own election as deputy leader after just four years in parliament. While Robson and Morton tied in the first ballot, the ‘pressure’ applied paid dividends in the second, with Robson winning by one vote. The position, of course, remained highly unstable, but the man best placed to take advantage of any further ructions was Askin. If Askin could not be the king — yet — then he could be kingmaker; a cursory reading of the press coverage at the time<sup>61</sup> shows Askin as the pre-eminent player in the process.

Askin saw this at the time, even offering to stand down as deputy leader if the party believed that a Morton supporter in the job would help consolidate the party, but the mood was for Askin to continue.<sup>62</sup> The *Herald* cautiously welcomed the election of

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decentralised that it would have been quite impossible for a junta to be hidden or tolerated.’ (Correspondence with author, 1 June 2002).

<sup>59</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1954.

<sup>60</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/29.

<sup>61</sup> Especially *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 1954.

<sup>62</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 1954.

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Robson, but noted that he had been handed ‘no more than a grudging permissive occupancy of the office’. In spite of this, Robson had ‘the ability, given proper backing, to make his mark as Opposition leader’, and his immediate task as leader was to create a new spirit within the party.<sup>63</sup>

There is a further dimension to Askin’s shrewdness in that he knew Robson well, and was under no illusions as to his shortcomings; indeed, evidence suggests that Askin was taking a far longer view of events than was head office, as Carrick was to recall years later that he, too, was under no illusions about Robson and his leadership capabilities, observing tellingly that ‘everything Murray Robson touched he touched lightly’.<sup>64</sup> Robson, to put it simply, was a social gadfly; for all his military experience he was no political leader, as events were swift to demonstrate. If relations with head office were strained under Treatt, they simply worsened under Robson who lacked flexibility in his dealings with colleagues and officials alike, displaying, as West put it, ‘an extraordinary want of tact and diplomacy’.<sup>65</sup> As Askin later recalled, Robson ‘made the error of trying to run the political party the same way as he’d run the battalion’.<sup>66</sup>

Robson brought a passion to the job that Treatt never had, but political sophistication and empathy with his parliamentary colleagues were never part of his tool kit. The former failing was displayed in his comprehensive lack of understanding of the reasons and issues underlying tensions between the Liberal and Country parties; the latter was evident in his failure to appreciate even the basics of political leadership. Robson failed to grasp the position of the Liberal Party’s often tenuous presence in the country, and accused the party organisation of taking an overly aggressive attitude towards the Country Party.<sup>67</sup> Carrick, for one, was dismayed.

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<sup>63</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August 1954.

<sup>64</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>65</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>66</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/29.

<sup>67</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

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He was a disaster. A solicitor, a socialite from the eastern suburbs. He went to [Country Party leader] Mick Bruxner and said what do we need with these organisations, you and I can run this show, you can have all the country seats. The party said no, so he called a special meeting of the State Council. He lost 11 to 134. We had a meeting and Bruxner said he agreed that triangular contests maximised the vote against Labor but if it meant a win for the Liberal Party, he was against it.<sup>68</sup>

Robson's overt support for what was essentially the Country Party's position against the wishes of his own party even brought a stern rebuke from the party president.

...I must point out that the Liberal Party Constitution reposes solely in the organisation the power to determine areas of contest. The organisation has made that determination. All members of the party are bound to uphold the Constitution in this and all other respects.<sup>69</sup>

Robson refused to be counselled, and he again found himself in conflict with the party's State Executive in 1956, when he opposed the endorsement of a Liberal candidate for a by-election in the Wollongong seat of Bulli. Even worse, Robson's erratic approach to the leadership was becoming apparent to the wider party, as this particular episode demonstrates. The secretary of the Wollongong branch of the Liberal Party wrote to the General Secretary, saying that the branch was 'most alarmed by the attitude of the Parliamentary Leader of the Party, Mr Murray Robson, in opposing the endorsement of a candidate' for the by-election, but at the same time, they were 'very gratified to learn from him that the Executive had almost unanimously agreed that our Candidate should be endorsed'.<sup>70</sup> In other words, Robson had once again been comprehensively rolled. But what gave the matter a bizarre twist was the meeting Robson held with Wollongong branch officials at their request to discuss his opposition to endorsing a candidate. They came away bemused and confused at both Robson's insistence that a significant swing towards the Liberals was not achievable and the contorted logic of his position. According to the letter from the Wollongong delegation, Robson was concerned at the 'State wide effect of a big swing to Liberals or a victory' after having just disagreed that a swing of even 7-10 per cent was achievable.

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<sup>68</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Moore to Robson, 11 October 1954, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, K53642, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Wollongong Branch to General Secretary, 9 July 1955, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, K53643, 3.

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This, Mr Robson stated, would probably cause an immediate welding of the cracked surface of the ALP, because Mr Cahill would undoubtedly use it to force the opposing elements to reunite, this, would then deeply affect the general elections in 1956....We cannot follow the logic in this statement...<sup>71</sup>

Once again, the State President was required to write to Robson reminding him of certain self-evident political truths.

No member of the Executive contemplates the winning of Bulli. It is felt, however, that there is a reasonable prospect of a 'swing' and that the knowledge of that 'swing', of whatever dimensions, will be of particular use to us.

The Executive does not feel that, if the Liberal Party should achieve significant 'swing', it would have any appreciable effect in increasing the tempo of the overall Labor campaign. The Victorian election has given Labor the maximum shock. Labor needs no further spurs to greater efforts.

Furthermore, past experience has shown that favourable by-election results have provided excellent stepping-stones in establishing the resurgence of Liberal goodwill. They are taken as 'pointers' and tend to snowball support for the Liberal cause.<sup>72</sup>

In the event, the Liberals did stand a candidate, and achieved a three per cent increase on the last comparable contest, in 1950, despite a former Liberal running as an independent. A 'provisional analysis' of the count by the party organisation applauded 'a very healthy increase' in the vote which clearly pointed to two things: one was 'major movement in the votes, reflecting a strong dissatisfaction with the Cahill government', and the other was 'a healthy gain in the Liberal vote'.<sup>73</sup> In its quiet, understated way it was a damning repudiation of Robson and his political judgement.

The supposed popular appeal of Robson was never put to the electoral test at a general election. His inability to reach across the yawning divide within the parliamentary party ranks was a major flaw in his leadership; the other was his unwillingness to take advice. If he inherited simmering discontent, his actions and failings as leader merely served to

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Moore to Robson, 8 June 1955, K53643, 10.

<sup>73</sup> 'Provisional analysis of Bulli By-election', K53643, 10.

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further raise rather than lower the temperature. The crisis was once more set to erupt, as Askin was only too well aware.

He was only in office about 12 months...and sure enough there was a palace revolution. I tried to warn him about it because I could hear, I used to keep my ear close to the ground, that's the way of deputy leaders, of course, and to report to their leader, and I tried to warn him but he wouldn't be warned, it wasn't his nature.<sup>74</sup>

The final straw appeared to be a dispute over the filling of a vacancy in the Legislative Council when Robson was found to have acted contrary to the expressed wishes of the party room.<sup>75</sup> By this time the party organisation had given up on Robson, although Carrick denies that the organisation orchestrated the removal.<sup>76</sup> While Robson certainly had major differences with the organisation and his colleagues, it was ultimately his temperament, authoritarian and inflexible, that turned the party against him. Robson, like others before him, had not appreciated the important distinctions between military and political leadership.<sup>77</sup> Carrick, personally and professionally, found Robson exasperating, describing him as 'a difficult man, almost impossible'.<sup>78</sup> The rumblings turned to action in September 1955 when the patience of the party room expired, and a motion was put that stated the Liberals could not win the next election unless, among other things, two essential conditions existed.

- (1) Our Parliamentary Leader must be willing to give effect to the majority will of his colleagues when expressed at party meetings.
- (2) Without any element of dictation on either side, the utmost possible friendliness and harmony should distinguish the working together of the Parliamentary party and the whole Liberal organisation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/29-30.

<sup>75</sup> West, *op. cit.*, p. 162; Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>76</sup> The State President, Lyle Moore, issued a Statement denying his or the organisation's involvement. It said, in part: 'Any suggestion that a challenge to Mr Robson's leadership has originated from Party headquarters can be nothing other than a deliberate and malicious untruth, aimed at damaging the Liberal Party's prestige'. (*Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 1955).

<sup>77</sup> Adjustment to post-military life had evidently not been easy for Lieutenant-Colonel Robson. During the war he had become estranged from his wife, and she divorced him after the war. (See entry in *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol 10, 1986*); West, *op. cit.*, also makes the political/military leadership distinction, p. 161.

<sup>78</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>79</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1955.

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An indication of the utter desperation that had arisen over Robson's leadership was that both the mover and seconder had previously been staunch Robson supporters. Even more desperate was the idea being floated publicly by some members of inviting Treatt back to 'heal the breach'.<sup>80</sup> The motion was carried by 15 votes to five, with Robson and another member abstaining. Morton and Ivan Black<sup>81</sup> nominated for the leader's job, Morton winning by 16 votes to six. Whatever goodwill had characterised Robson's elevation a little more than 12 months before had been savagely eroded. As one of his erstwhile supporters commented: 'You can't be a lone wolf and leader of the pack at the same time'.<sup>82</sup> Askin was returned unopposed as deputy because, as he later put it, the Morton faction acknowledged that he 'had tried to get on well with everybody'.<sup>83</sup> However, his public support for Robson (and the fact that he voted for Robson supporter Black in the ballot) clearly alienated some in the Morton camp who were contemplating a later move against Askin.<sup>84</sup>

Just why Askin did not nominate has never been explained, and he offered no explanation in his public statements. However, two and possibly three factors were likely to have influenced him. First, Askin was always numerate and he would have clearly known, especially from his vantage point as deputy leader, that he simply did not have the numbers. Secondly, the failed experiment with Robson was largely of Askin's own making and this would have been remembered, especially among those who had supported Robson and later changed their votes. An additional factor may well have been Askin's determination to retain the deputy leadership, and under the circumstances this was best achieved by a prudent nod to prevailing opinion.

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<sup>80</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 1955. The two were Kenneth Malcolm McCaw (1907-1989) MLA Lane Cove 1947-75, Attorney-General 1965-75 and Donald Stewart Fraser (1895-1965) MLA Gordon 1953-62.

<sup>81</sup> Ivan Carlisle Black (1913-1990) MLA Neutral Bay 1945-51, 1951-62.

<sup>82</sup> Comment quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1955.

<sup>83</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/30.

<sup>84</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1955.

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With more than a hint of weariness, the *Sydney Morning Herald* wondered what the Liberals were up to with another unseemly leadership row as an election fell due. If the party was intent on courting yet another defeat ‘this sustained failure to choose an acceptable leader and back him loyally would be the right way to go about it’. One of his handicaps had been an inability to work amicably either with the Liberal Party executive or with sections of his parliamentary following. While noting that his taking of an ‘independent line’ on an issue such as the degree of co-operation with the Country Party was not necessarily to his discredit as parliamentary leader, the *Herald* found him wanting in leadership qualities generally.

But a man who hopes to impose his will on the party must show himself possessed of real political capacity and outstanding qualities of leadership. Mr Robson, unhappily, has proved deficient in these respects. He began well, but has since made no impact on public opinion, produced few fresh ideas on policy, and failed conspicuously to pull the party together.

Unlike Treatt a year earlier, Robson was not going to go quietly; the Liberal Party would pay a price for his public humiliation. Clearly bitter at the way he was deposed, he issued a statement in which he said ‘the writing was on the wall for me from the moment I supported a pact with the Country Party in order to defeat Labour at the next election’.

I took the view that if we win, we could not form a Government without the Country Party, so to me the sensible thing seemed to be to fight Labour and not the Country Party.

Those in control at Ash Street decided otherwise, and influenced a council decision to reject the Country Party’s offer of a pact, and to fight them as well as Labour...

It is significant that not one of my detractors in the Parliamentary Liberal Party has ever criticised my leadership on the score that the people would not trust me or that they would have no confidence in me.

When I was elected as Parliamentary leader, I received all sorts of assurances of loyalty and co-operation from the executive and from the Parliamentary party.

This has not been forthcoming.

But there has been a continuous intrigue against my leadership since the beginning of the year.

Today’s vote shows how successful this intrigue has been.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1955.

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The abrupt change of leadership just a year after Treatt was deposed, the brutal manner of its doing and the bitter denunciation of the party organisation by Robson virtually ended any hopes of winning the forthcoming elections, as some members were saying privately.<sup>86</sup> The timing was bad, and one newspaper editorial accused the Liberals of floundering ‘in hopeless confusion’ just as Labor was ‘growing cynical and rotten with too many years in office’; the leadership change had driven ‘the last nail into the coffin of their hopes of office’.<sup>87</sup> Reaction to Morton’s election, however, was generally positive. The *Herald*<sup>88</sup> noted that three of his uncles had been members of the Legislative Assembly, and that he had worked his way up in business from office boy to director.<sup>89</sup> A columnist in the *Sun-Herald* described the new leader as ‘a bustling, genial type, ambitious and confident’ but also ‘untried’.<sup>90</sup>

Whether it was a change for the better is problematic; Morton brought his own baggage to the position, but the Liberal Party, in what was to become an oft-repeated exercise of a Messiah Complex, preferred not to see the downside. The party was in dire straits; a defeatist mentality was starting to appear as the Liberals in New South Wales took on increasingly the trappings of a permanent opposition.<sup>91</sup> Even some Federal Liberals from New South Wales questioned the wisdom of a potentially damaging leadership change so close to an election.<sup>92</sup> One commentator summed up the situation succinctly.

A legalistic introvert was replaced by the flamboyant ex-lieutenant-colonel of an infantry regiment; but having led his colleagues as would a company sergeant-major, he was

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<sup>86</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 1955.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1955.

<sup>89</sup> Morton made much of this, but even though his father, a Lismore stock and station agent, died when he was young, he came from a family that was moderately wealthy as it was politically connected with three of his uncles having been Members of Parliament.

<sup>90</sup> *Sun-Herald*, 25 September 1955.

<sup>91</sup> R. S. Parker, *The Government of New South Wales*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p. 86.

<sup>92</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1955.

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replaced by a genial company director who transformed the parliamentary party into a political club and became its essentially part-time president.<sup>93</sup>

Following as leader two lawyers of very different temperament, Morton brought a fresh perspective to bear on both the party and political life, a point he emphasised in his first statement as leader when he said he would try to ‘sell the philosophy of free enterprise to the people of this State’, and that he would approach government as he approached business.<sup>94</sup> This tended to pose something of an identity problem for the party in New South Wales, not to mention leadership style which differs as much in politics from corporate leadership and it does from military leadership.<sup>95</sup> With a broad philosophy that lauded opportunity and reward for initiative and effort, the Liberals could point to Morton as a standout success. Yet Morton, with his extensive business interests was, as a political type, a throwback to the pre-professional age of politics, and certainly not in accord with the modern full-time approach that the Liberal Party, in deliberate contradistinction with the old amateurish UAP, liked to project. It would, in the end, spell Morton’s downfall: the thoroughly modern Askin, by this time proclaiming by word and deed that he was a full-time professional politician,<sup>96</sup> already thwarted once in his efforts to block Morton (an opponent three years younger and with powerful connections<sup>97</sup>) now had him squarely in his sights.

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<sup>93</sup> Katharine Holgate (West), ‘Liberal Party Problems in NSW State Politics’, *Australian Quarterly*, Vol 33, No 4, December, 1961, pp. 15-22, p. 22.

<sup>94</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 21 September 1955.

<sup>95</sup> If Robson misunderstood what was required of political leadership by confusing it with military leadership then so too did Morton in confusing it with corporate leadership. Military leadership, in an organisational sense, is essentially hierarchical in that it is designed for a specific purpose – waging war. It is therefore necessarily authoritarian in terms of the structure in which it operates and its emphasis on such aspects as obedience to orders, and adherence to chain of command. (See Laurie A. Brooding, ‘The Psychology of Leadership’ in James H. Buck & Lawrence A. Orb (eds.), *Military Leadership* (Volume 10 in Sage Research Progress Series on War, Revolution, and Peacekeeping), Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1981, p 90). Morton, for his part, sought to apply his managerial experience in which, in order to maximize profit, decisions are taken based upon a rational calculus. (See David R. Seagull, ‘Leadership and Management: Organization Theory’ in Buck & Orb, *op. cit.*, p. 45.). In neither case is the full participation of the group taken into account; both fall into the “follow me” school of leadership.

<sup>96</sup> Askin in 1957 was to divest himself, quite astutely, of his only outside business interest, a share in a printing business in his electorate. (Radi, Spearritt, Hinton, *op. cit.*, p. 9).

<sup>97</sup> Morton was on good terms, unlike Robson and Treatt, with the influential State President (also a businessman) and later a Senator and Minister, Robert Cotton; he also had amicable relations with Carrick who described him as ‘likeable, even lovable’. (See West, *op. cit.*, fn p. 138; Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 86). Carrick said Cotton and Morton spoke a similar language and understood one another. (Carrick interview, 24 May 2002).

### 4.3. Another Leader, Another Loss

**IF THE** Labor Government in the State was ripe for removal in the early 1950s, it was certainly ready for burial by the time the 1956 election loomed, though for different reasons. The incompetence of the McGirr years and the lax administration that characterised that period had given way to perceptions of a more insidious character: government and bureaucratic high-handedness, a creeping authoritarianism, entrenched nepotism and even suggestions of corruption.<sup>98</sup> While in 1953 the relative unpopularity of the Menzies-Fadden Coalition in power federally was a key factor, this situation no longer obtained in 1956, with Federal Labor discredited, a resounding electoral victory in 1955, and the post-war economic boom in full swing. The Federal result in New South Wales in the snap election called on 10 December was promising for the Liberals with a three per cent gain over 1954 in the House of Representatives; in the Senate the combined Liberal-Country Party team actually outpolled Labor.<sup>99</sup> Cahill, despite his sizeable majority, went on the defensive, not only counselling his own team about

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<sup>98</sup> Two key pieces of legislation introduced by the Cahill Government at the insistence of the inexperienced Grouper-controlled Executive proved both unpopular and ineffective – compulsory unionism and the Obscene and Indecent Publications Act. Much was made in the press of Labor's opposition to compulsory military service in wartime while seeking to impose compulsory unionism in peacetime. In addition, there were constant allegations of corruption in the Labor-controlled Sydney City Council to which the government responded with the Sydney City Council (Disclosure of Allegations) Bill in November 1954. This sought to force newspapers carrying allegations of corruption to either reveal their sources of information or to refrain from unsubstantiated allegations. It became known as the 'Gag the Press Bill' and was repealed after proceedings against a newspaper failed and costs were awarded against the Government. Earlier in the term, a Minister, Joe Arthur, was forced to resign in disgrace after certain matters involving shady business dealings led to a Royal Commission, and another Minister was accused of trying to have traffic matters against family members withdrawn. A recurring theme of the election campaign was the cry of 'government by executive and administrative action instead of by the elected representatives' and a 'jobs for the boys' policy in the formerly independent public service. (Frank Frost, 'The 1956 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-7, p. 342.) In Parliament, Cahill was ruthless in his use of the gag to control debate, reverting to it on a record 85 occasions in the 1953-56 Parliament, despite holding a majority of 20 in the Assembly and five in the Council. (Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 183). For a detailed discussion of Parliament under Cahill, see Clune, 'The Labor Government in NSW 1941-65,' *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>99</sup> Liberal vote in NSW House of Representatives election 38.64 per cent (38.55 in 1954), Country Party (8.62, 8.52), ALP (49.56, 50.03); Senate: Lib-CP (48.47) ALP (43.82). (No Senate election in 1954). Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 394, 398.).

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divisions in the ranks, but seeking also to exploit the disunity clearly evident among the Liberals. In his policy speech, he said:

Your alternative to a continuance of sound, practical Labor government is attempted government by a Party which is divided against itself; a Party which is uncertain of its own leaders and entirely vague as to its own policies. It is a Party led by, and mainly composed of, untried, inexperienced men who, in their political weakness, accept and repeat the dictates of their Liberal-Country Party masters at Canberra.<sup>100</sup>

The Opposition in New South Wales also had a powerful ally — the press, with three of the four Sydney daily newspapers strongly opposing Labor.<sup>101</sup> Despite the Liberals going in to the election with ‘a legacy of conflicts involving its goals and its leadership’,<sup>102</sup> there was no question that Labor was vulnerable and exposed on a variety of fronts. Morton weighed in heavily, characterising the election campaign in his wide-ranging policy speech as a ‘crusade — the people versus the Cahill Government’.<sup>103</sup> Again, he talked of bringing ‘proven business methods’ to government, and he pledged a series of reforms in housing, transport, hospitals, education, electricity generation and local government. His attempt at playing the populist card was echoed in the Liberal Party advertising, one advertisement depicting Cahill on trial (‘...by you, the people of New South Wales’) with a banner headline listing ‘The Evils of Cahill Rule in NSW’ — ‘jobs for the boys’, cloaked scandals, compulsory unionism, the press gag, seizure of private property, ‘rigged’ electoral laws.<sup>104</sup> Morton also sought to lift the rhetoric to a higher plane; this was no ordinary campaign, he said, it was not the usual contest between two political parties. Rather, it was a test of fundamental principles and political moralities.<sup>105</sup> As political rhetoric it was overblown, more in keeping with a *Herald* editorial than in connecting with the public mood; if Morton had not yet established himself as ‘dinkum’ with the undecided voters, his focus on abstractions and broad generalities was not going to achieve it.

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<sup>100</sup> Labor 1956 Policy Speech, cited in Clune, *op. cit.*, ‘The Labor Government in NSW’, p. 110.

<sup>101</sup> Frost, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>103</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 1956.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 1956.

<sup>105</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1956.

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Morton, however, was received favourably, though not uncritically, by the press. A columnist in the Sunday *Sun-Herald* saw the policy speech as having ‘the refreshing energy of a southerly buster — and it ranged about as widely’.<sup>106</sup> The *Herald* editorialised that it had been many years since a State election campaign had produced ‘as hard-hitting and constructive a policy speech’.<sup>107</sup>

A week later the *Herald* returned to the theme of electoral gerrymandering, repeating the Morton cry that this was no ordinary election, and that Morton’s fears were well grounded. It briefly pondered the circumstances that the Liberal-Country Party would confront in the event of yet another loss, and the ensuing unfavourable electoral redistribution. Could they be expected to preserve their morale?<sup>108</sup>

With election day approaching, the *Herald* was unrelenting. At the start of the last week of the campaign prior to polling day it once more hammered the theme of the past few State elections — that a change of government was long overdue in New South Wales. It brushed aside Cahill’s claims that the Opposition comprised ‘inexperienced amateurs’, and tilted at the Government’s policy speech which contained little that was new, and would satisfy only those who had become so conditioned to Labor rule that they find it hard ‘to visualise the possibility of a fresh and more dynamic order’.<sup>109</sup>

Four days later, the *Herald* published the last of a series of four articles purporting to show how the long reign of Labor had made it tired in government. It suggested that Morton was the man whose time had arrived, but also speculated on the dangers of office again eluding the coalition parties and further weakening the Opposition.

It loses heart. It no longer attracts young and ambitious men. It lacks the experience of administration which is necessary. Mr Morton has overcome all these disadvantages

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<sup>106</sup> *Sun-Herald*, 19 February 1956.

<sup>107</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1956.

<sup>108</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1956.

<sup>109</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 1956.

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with astonishing success. His team has the will to win and the ability to rule. He has got rid of the despondency which seemed to have settled on the party a few years ago.<sup>110</sup>

Come polling day and the result hung in the balance, with counting in several tight contests to continue over the next few days. The *Herald* was able to gloat the following Monday that whatever the eventual outcome the Cahill Government, previously commanding a majority of 22, had suffered ‘a severe defeat’. The editorial hailed ‘the Liberal revival under Mr Morton’s energetic leadership’.<sup>111</sup> As Treatt had done in 1950, Morton had taken the Liberals to the brink. While their position *vis à vis* the Government had discernibly improved (Liberals 27 seats, up from 22; Country 15, 14; ALP 50, 57), this served, if anything, to intensify the pressure on Morton to meet the expectations raised.

There were very real problems inherent in both the election result as well as the nature of the Parliamentary Liberal Party in New South Wales; Morton’s leadership was more a part of the problem than it was an answer, though this was not audibly expressed at the time. In terms of aggregate votes, slightly more than 50,000 were cast for Labor in the March 1956 NSW election than were cast for Labor in the Senate election for NSW less than three months earlier; correspondingly, almost 74,000 votes fewer were cast for the Liberal-Country Party in the same comparison.<sup>112</sup> Clearly, distinctions were being made in the minds of voters between Federal and State issues and parties; many voters who were unable to support the ALP at Federal level found no such objection at State level, a situation that the ever-astute Cahill had worked hard to achieve. If a split in New South Wales, as had happened in Victoria, was not going to eventuate, the coalition parties needed to find new ways of wooing traditional Labor voters if that bloc of votes denied to the Federal ALP was ever to be lured across the political divide in the State.

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<sup>110</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1956.

<sup>111</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 March 1956.

<sup>112</sup> ALP vote in Senate for NSW on 10 December 1955: 760,069; ALP vote NSW State election 3 March 1956: 810,767; L-CP vote for Senate 840,718; L-CP vote NSW State election 766,860. (Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 398, 465).

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It was an article of faith among the founders and often expressed in the rhetoric of the new Liberal Party back in 1944-45 as it rose from the ashes of the discredited United Australia Party that it was to be a party for *all* Australians, not a sectional party, not beholden to any group or interests, and certainly not a party of the rich and powerful. Indeed, the very people that Menzies pitched his earliest messages at were the ‘forgotten people’. Over reliance on business for both financial support and policy direction had been clearly identified as one of the fatal weaknesses of the UAP, and the Liberal Party determined to be different. The business community, it was found, could be fickle, ‘an uneasy friend’, ready to follow the prevailing breeze.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the early and repeated electoral success of the Liberals at Federal level was attributed to the party’s attracting ‘consistently a heavy trade unionist vote’.<sup>114</sup> Yet there was no room for complacency, as a Political Appreciation of the 1955 Federal poll submitted to the Liberals’ Federal Executive in early 1956 clearly showed. Nationally, the Liberal Party had retained much of the vote it took from Labor in 1949; it was also starting to attract a section of the traditional Catholic Labor vote, and the relative decline of the Country Party offered further inroads into rural electorates. Yet – and here was the nub – the Liberal Party would not make any ‘permanent’ gains if it did not exploit its 1955 mandate and its large majority to create ‘a more conscious acceptance of the Liberal Party and of the Liberal Government’.<sup>115</sup>

In New South Wales this was simply not happening. The lack of commitment among Liberal members of parliament was often noted,<sup>116</sup> moreover, their business activities themselves militated against the ideal of the Liberal Party being the voice for the ‘forgotten people’. The New South Wales party, at this time, enjoyed the dubious

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<sup>113</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>114</sup> W. H. Anderson, Federal President of the Liberal Party of Australia, address to Ninth Annual Meeting of the Federal Council, Canberra, 8 November 1954. Published as *The Real Conflict of Our Times*, Liberal Party, Canberra, 1954. He wrote: ‘Three years ago 61 per cent of white-collar workers told poll-takers that they voted for Liberalism and Mr Menzies in 1949 and 38 per cent of skilled workers said the same. Indeed, public opinion polls suggest that the Labor Party has very heavy support only in one occupational group – the unskilled worker group, but even there it hasn’t a monopoly by any means.’ (p. 6).

<sup>115</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>116</sup> West refers to ‘absenteeism from the House...lack of initiative in policy formulation...indifference about gaining government office.’ (West, *op. cit.*, p. 153).

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distinction of being unique in its proportion of part-time State politicians: of the 39 Liberal members of the Legislative Assembly in the post-war period to the end of 1961, two-thirds had part time employment outside their parliamentary activities and, of these, only four were not self-employed.<sup>117</sup> Two of the members were executive directors of trade associations<sup>118</sup> — virtually the public face and voice of employers' bodies. Thus when Stewart Fraser, MLA for Gordon, in his industry capacity attacked the Cahill Government for preferring to use housing money for public housing rather than privately-owned housing,<sup>119</sup> it was natural for there to be a degree of confusion as for whom he was speaking. A confusion of roles such as these, and clearly speaking for employer interests, were not the ideal means by which to appeal to traditional Labor voters and trade unionists.

The analysis of the 1956 defeat in New South Wales did not immediately touch on these themes. Anxious to praise Morton, the *Herald* lauded his 'good campaign' and the way he had taken his disappointment 'manfully'; but it said that despite the gains the party still needed to ask itself 'whether any avoidable weaknesses prevented those gains from being converted into victory'. The *Herald* editorial dismissed as 'facile' claims by the Country Party that three-cornered contests in rural electorates, notably Dubbo, Young and Mudgee, were to blame.

Yet there is here a possible cause of weakness which the Opposition parties should obviously examine. It would be folly for them to continue competing with one another at each election, if the net result is the confirmation of Labour in office indefinitely. Meanwhile, the Liberal and Country Party should aim at the maximum degree of co-operation in the new House. They have the numbers to build an effective, indeed formidable, Opposition; and the habit of planning and working together in Parliament will make co-operation easier in the election field.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>118</sup> Eric Willis, MLA Earlwood, was secretary of the Fibrous Plaster Association 1955-65; Stewart Fraser, MLA Gordon, was executive director Building Industry Congress 1945-62.

<sup>119</sup> Cited in John Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies' Australia*, University of NSW Press/Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 143.

<sup>120</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 March 1956.

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There ensued a debate in the letters to the editor, one writer asking why the coalition worked effectively at Federal level and not at the State level, the Liberal Party replying that three-cornered contests were the norm at Federal elections. ‘The one difference – the existence of a joint policy speech on the Federal level – is a matter for the Country Party Leader and is beyond the control of the Liberal Party’,<sup>121</sup> an official explained cryptically.

Despite the *Herald* calling for a merger of the two parties,<sup>122</sup> the issue faded away as it had done on previous occasions. What did not fade away, however, was talk of the extensive — and apparently growing — business interests of Pat Morton. When another active businessman, Blake Pelly who, among other things was at the time chairman of Conzinc Rio Tinto (Australia), resigned his seat of Wollondilly in 1957, the new Liberal member elected to succeed him, Tom Lewis,<sup>123</sup> recalls there having been talk then about Morton’s commitment and that he ‘didn’t have enough get up and go’.<sup>124</sup>

Despair at the seemingly permanent status of opposition was apparent at all levels of the party. Even the normally unflappable general secretary, Carrick, betrayed more than a sense of exasperation at the continual portrayal of the Liberal Party in a letter he wrote to a prominent academic in response to a draft article on the Liberals in New South Wales which argued that their fissiparous nature was an obstacle to winning office. Carrick complained that ‘a very large space has been devoted to the stresses’ within the State Parliamentary Liberal Party’, but the fact was that ‘nothing comparable to the great Labor schisms has occurred’<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Letter from A. D. Bridges, MLC, Vice-President Liberal Party, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1956.

<sup>122</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1956.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Lancelot Lewis (1922- ) MLA Wollondilly 1957-78, Minister for Lands 1965-67, Minister for Mines 1965-67, Minister for Tourism 1972-73, Premier and Treasurer 1975-76, Minister for Local Government 1976.

<sup>124</sup> Interview, Tom Lewis, 2 August 2002.

<sup>125</sup> Letter Carrick to R S Parker, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 26 February 1957, comments on a draft paper ‘Political Parties and Interest Groups’, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, K 53642, 10.

#### 4.4. 1959: The Wind Shifts

**THE RUN UP** to the 1959 election was in many ways similar to that of 1956, but with one significant difference: the Democratic Labor Party was standing candidates. The DLP's preferences had been essential to the Liberals in Victoria in stringing together successive election wins after the ALP imploded; they had also been instrumental in the Federal wins of 1955 and 1958. Five by-elections took place between 1956 and 1959, but by far the most closely scrutinised and analysed was that on 16 February 1957 in Burwood, a safe Liberal seat which was not contested by the ALP. Although the Liberals retained it, the DLP polled almost 21 per cent — a result that set alarm bells ringing in all political camps. Tensions still ran high in the Labor Party, and the early form of the DLP was clearly a worry for the Cahill Government. Given that there had been no major split in New South Wales and that the DLP had had little time to organise, it was 'a surprisingly good result'. A replication of this in a general election, with DLP preferences directed away from Labor, posed a very real threat.<sup>126</sup> The Liberal Party, too, had its concerns. A detailed analysis of the voting noted that in a comparison with 1953, when the Liberal Party was unpopular, the Liberal primary vote had declined from 57.1 per cent of the formal vote to 45.9 per cent, a drop of 11.2 per cent, some of which could be attributed to the popularity of an Independent, a former Alderman, disaffection over the Liberal pre-selection and the fact that the Liberal candidate was not a local. At the same time, the combined Labor vote declined from 42.9 per cent to 35.4 per cent, a drop of 7.5 per cent. The analysis, clearly written by Carrick, carried an ominous warning for the future.

[T]he DLP vote is still very impressive and the magnitude of the Labor conflict is heavily underlined. The progress of the DLP in the key State of NSW has been far more rapid than anticipated. The fact that the Liberal Party won Burwood by a record majority is no cause for complacency. The by-election showed the Liberal vote to be vulnerable both to Independents and to the DLP...In short term, much depends on the ability of Mr Cahill to

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<sup>126</sup> David Clune, 'The 1959 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 355. Even the DLP was surprised at the result. See Jack Kane, *Exploding the Myths: The Political Memoirs of Jack Kane*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989, p. 160.

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preserve his existing balance between the DLP and ALP. To retain government, he must receive immunity from the DLP in his “key” seats. Equally, he must avoid the danger of the State ALP running left-wing candidates against his sitting members. In long term, whether the DLP merges with the ALP or becomes a centre party, the Liberal Party cannot afford to pursue expedients. The plain fact is that we are not yet polling 50 per cent of the Australian vote in our own right. Until we do, our future is far from secure. In the long term, Labor (whether two parties or one) will emerge greatly strengthened. The Liberal Party must prepare now to meet that challenge.<sup>127</sup>

The landscape for the approaching 1959 election looked eerily familiar. The newspapers had carried new charges of scandal and impropriety, especially in regard to Sydney City Council; there were allegations of bribery and police corruption; and even a Cabinet Minister, Abe Landa, was accused by the Auditor-General of improper conduct in having allegedly used his position as a Minister to assist a company represented by his law firm. A Royal Commission subsequently found that Landa had acted imprudently, but not improperly.<sup>128</sup> In addition, the bitter fallout from the Labor split had led to significant divisions in Caucus, and these tensions frequently spilled into the public arena.

Ordinarily, an opposition would be having a field day with so many targets presenting themselves, but the Liberal forces had been severely vitiated by divisions and dissension of their own; the Opposition had reached its post-war nadir.<sup>129</sup> Morton, despite repeated attempts by the *Herald* to portray him positively, was seen increasingly by colleagues and electors alike as a part-timer and a loser, and there were suggestions his business interests were more extensive than he had indicated.<sup>130</sup> The Liberals in New South Wales received little support from the business community,<sup>131</sup> another factor that added to the ‘loser’ image and merely deepened the despondency, especially after the Menzies win in 1958.<sup>132</sup> Yet, for all this, Morton was portrayed by the *Herald* in a flattering profile on election day as a man who had healed the wounds in the Liberal Party.

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<sup>127</sup> ‘Burwood by-election; Sat 16 Feb 1957, Analysis of DLP - ALP trends’, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, Y 4641.

<sup>128</sup> Clune, ‘The 1959 Election’, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>130</sup> Holgate (West), ‘Liberal Party Problems in N.S.W. State Politics’, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>131</sup> Clune, ‘The 1959 Election’, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

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The party he inherited was seething with enmities and contorted by conflicting pressures. He was hardly in the saddle when the 1956 State elections were upon him.

He took the Liberals to the polls showing some semblance of unity and almost led them into government, for the Labour Party was returned only by the skin of its teeth with a majority of three seats won on a decimal fraction of votes. After the election he got down to work to weld his forces, and now has achieved what even his followers previously thought was impossible.

He has closed the gaps, resolved the feuds and given back a single purpose to the Parliamentary Liberal Party.<sup>133</sup>

But the reality was quite different. Within the party there were growing feelings of a widening gulf between the successful Federal Liberals and failed New South Wales Liberals, with claims that the Federal Government did little to help and that the party organisation in the State was more concerned with keeping Menzies in office than assisting the State Opposition. Menzies himself may have unwittingly contributed to this perception among his State colleagues during the 1959 campaign when Cahill had dubbed Morton 'Promising Pat' for the magnitude of his promises. Menzies, when asked if he could underwrite the Opposition's promises, pointedly replied: 'I am not an underwriter'.<sup>134</sup> An indication of the tensions between State and Federal Liberals is vividly demonstrated in a petulant exchange of letters in 1959 with head office, ignited by a complaint from a field officer.

As I have done in past years I have drawn up a schedule of Branch Annual Meetings at times I think will suit Mr Jackson<sup>135</sup> and Mr Dean.<sup>136</sup> When the schedule was partly completed I placed it before both Members...After having seen the schedule, Mr Jackson asked how many meetings Mr Dean would attend, I replied that as far as I could see - none. Mr Jackson thereupon refused to attend any himself as he was not going to be 'the party hack for the Federal boys'. There is, of course, an extensive background to this dispute covering such items as loss of several State elections, Federal MP salary rises, inter-parliamentary jealousies, being in opposition for years, etc...<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002; Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

<sup>133</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 1959.

<sup>134</sup> Clune, 'The 1959 Election', *op. cit.*, p. 372; Askin interview 1:1/31.

<sup>135</sup> Harold Ernest Jackson (1902-1980) MLA Gosford 1950-65.

<sup>136</sup> Roger Levinge Dean (1913-1998) MHR Robertson 1949-64.

<sup>137</sup> Letter Raine to Henehan, 20 July 1959, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell library, K 53623, 5.

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The matter found its way to Carrick's desk and he wrote to the Federal MP, Roger Dean, attempting to smooth things over.

Naturally, I am not going to 'take sides' in these affairs, but I think it pointless for one party to blame the other for its lack of success. It is true, of course, that there were some unfortunate incidents in the recent State elections. And it is equally true that the State Liberal Party deserved to win, in terms of the votes it polled. These things must build frustrations, but they can't be of benefit if they end up in headlong collisions.<sup>138</sup>

As far as the Liberals were concerned, 1959 was very much a rerun of 1956: much to campaign against, a favourable press and a very close result. But they were still not in government; the *status quo* prevailed with Labor (49) losing a seat, the Liberals (28) gaining a seat, as did the Country Party (16). Once more, the *Sydney Morning Herald* surveyed the bleak prospects of no longer 18 years in opposition, but 21, and in doing took a swipe at the Opposition's lack of preparation, and by implication, shortcomings of leadership. An opposition had to do more than simply oppose if it genuinely aspired to government, and the essential prerequisite for this was 'strong and courageous leadership', which had to be shown over an entire parliamentary term, not just the few weeks of an election campaign.<sup>139</sup> Implicit in the comments is a criticism of less than total commitment to the business of politics.

A former State parliamentary colleague of the Liberals, Harry Turner,<sup>140</sup> by then MHR for Bradfield, wrote a bleak assessment of the State party's woes, its long years in the political wilderness, and its predilection for leadership changes.

To all appearances, the party decapitated one leader after another with the same abandon as would the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. Stevens was followed by Mair, Weaver, Treatt, Morton, Robson, and finally Askin in the space of 18 years. Yet the weakness was not so much disruptive ambition as lack of morale: the creeping paralysis of abandoned hope; lack of steadfastness; the incapacity to plan for victory, and unwillingness to engage in sheer hard work at the grass roots. The party yielded to the facile belief that a change of leader was the road to electoral success, even a change in the name of the party, from U.A.P. to Democratic and finally to Liberal. The leaders'

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<sup>138</sup> Letter Carrick to Dean, 22 July 1959. K 53623, 5.

<sup>139</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March 1959.

<sup>140</sup> Henry Basil Turner (1905-1988), MLA Gordon 1937-52, MHR Bradfield 1952-74.

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heads rolled because they did not, and without the other necessary groundwork could not, win elections.<sup>141</sup>

Turner traced the landscape of the ‘unrewarding years’, finding little to blame in the qualities of the men chosen to lead the Liberal Party — ‘men of good standing and generally representative of the classes and interests supporting them, whatever their deficiencies as politicians’. In contrasting their political skills with those of their Labor opponents — men ‘trained in the tough school of union and intra-party politics...[who] have more readily accepted the role of full-time professionals diligently cultivating the grass roots’ — Turner got to the nub of his argument, which drew a key distinction between Askin and those who preceded him.

The Liberals...have too often been dilettantes, distracted by their private concerns. They represent more diverse and nebulous interests, less down-to-earth than Labor members with their intimate trade union links and the Country Party with its primary-producer base. It is perhaps not without significance that Askin and his team more closely resemble their opponents than their predecessors. In short, bread-and-butter issues and adroitness are of the essence of politics in New South Wales today.<sup>142</sup>

The epitome of the dilettante was surely Morton. To him politics was only ever a part-time calling; and this put him significantly at odds with an electorate with which he could never completely engage: he was simply not one of them. Whatever his strengths, the essence of Morton, the would-be Premier, remained elusive, as an otherwise flattering profile suggested, observing in passing that it was ‘difficult to penetrate to the kernel of the private nature of Mr Philip Henry Morton, the 48-year-old Leader of the Opposition’.<sup>143</sup>

The loss, however narrow, in 1959 meant that his end was nigh. A post-mortem on the election campaign carried out by a State Council committee of the party was as damning of Morton’s leadership ‘image’ as it was of ‘absenteeism’ — a euphemism for members attending to private interests rather than the demands of Parliament.

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<sup>141</sup> H. B. Turner, ‘New South Wales’, in John Rorke (ed.) *Politics at State Level – Australia*, Department of Adult Education in the University of Sydney, n.d., p. 69.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

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...every effort was made to produce good presentation, and that technically, the campaign was satisfactory. However, the campaign failed to present our State Leader as a personality, whereas the Labor campaign successfully presented the Premier, Mr Cahill. The Committee felt that one reason for the failure to sell our State Leader was that his personality had not been built up in the various publicity media over the intervening years...The Committee stressed that we were unsuccessful in upsetting the Cahill 'legend' and that TV was one of the media in which we failed in that task...

The Committee concluded that Liberal leadership was not established in the public eye as a fully acceptable alternative to the entrenched leadership of Mr Cahill. Furthermore, the absenteeism of some Liberal Party members from Divisions in the House, had created an unfavourable impression with the electors. The Opposition parties had not always fully exploited available issues.<sup>144</sup>

Public discussion again turned to the issue of members having outside employment. Increasingly, there was a feeling among members that leadership of the party should be a full-time job; if anything, the tantalising closeness of the election result only served to exacerbate this.<sup>145</sup> Talk was obviously being fed by anti-Morton elements in the Liberal Party — as this paragraph by a columnist in the *Sun-Herald* indicates.

Before dropping the subject, party critics of Opposition Leader Pat Morton's adherence to his private business interests could have asked one pertinent question. Granted that it was hard to expect him to give up his existing business connections when he became leader, why did he extend them a year ago by accepting the chairmanship of a tool company? This was surely asking for trouble. With an election coming up, Morton should have been concentrating more and more on politics, instead of further diverting his attention to company direction. Had he become Premier, he would have had to renounce this new post. Acceptance of it 12 months before the poll did not suggest much faith in victory. There is nothing narrow or personal in these criticisms. Pat Morton is a diligent worker. Quite likely he can do his parliamentary job just as effectively and conscientiously as it could be done by a less energetic man without business commitments.<sup>146</sup>

Askin, who had served as deputy leader under Morton, admired Morton's common sense and his application of business methods to treasury and financial matters; he also spoke of Morton's ability to get on well with people, but he identified what he saw as a major

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<sup>143</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 1959.

<sup>144</sup> Report of the State Council Committee Elected to Review and Report on the 1959 State Elections, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, MS 2385, K5319, 8, pp. 4-5.

<sup>145</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/32.

<sup>146</sup> *Sun-Herald*, 3 May 1959

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failing. Morton's biggest fault, according to Askin, was 'ultra caution, too much caution', and a reluctance to take risks. This had the effect of narrowing his room to move and meant that opportunities were missed, especially in scoring points off the Government. Two defeats had exacerbated that innate caution, and when added to the fact that he was devoting considerable time to his private business interests, his downfall was imminent.<sup>147</sup>

Inevitably, there was a move against Morton's leadership. Askin was in a difficult position as deputy leader, and this difficulty was very much in his mind when the dissidents approached him and asked him to run. His first thought was that he would have to resign, and he was not prepared to do this; when he told the dissidents this it 'put a stop to it for a while'.<sup>148</sup> Askin was still concerned about the apparent closeness of the numbers, and was reported as having told those urging him to stand that he would not lead except with the support of at least 20 of the 28 members.<sup>149</sup> But the anti-Morton movement gathered momentum, and on the eve of the move against Morton a deputation of six called on Askin with an ultimatum: agree to stand or someone else will and they will win.<sup>150</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* uttered its predictable sigh of despair at the prospect of yet another leadership challenge in the Liberal Party. Previously a strong supporter of Morton, the *Herald* pointedly singled out the Opposition's recent performance as having been 'anything but forceful'.

Somehow, the Liberal voice has been muted – or at least too apt to relapse into cautious silence – over such recent controversies as the licensing of motor service stations, the 35-hour week for State coalminers, the limitation of shopping hours, the election of Mayors by popular vote, and the penal clauses of the State Arbitration Act. On these and other questions the Liberals have been all too ready to leave the battle to someone else.

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<sup>147</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/33-4.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, 1:1/33.

<sup>149</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 1959.

<sup>150</sup> The identity of the other possible contender was never disclosed to Askin, but it was almost certainly Willis. (Conversations by author with Carrick 24 May 2002 and Lewis 2 August 2002).

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The existence of such a situation may well be considered a failure of leadership. But that is not the whole story. An Opposition Leader can hardly react convincingly, and in a way which is disquieting to the Government, if his party lacks a clear idea of where it is going, if it is afraid of losing even a few votes – if, in fact, it is chronically divided on detailed matters of policy.<sup>151</sup>

Askin was not prepared to challenge Morton, but if the position were to be declared vacant, as it had been in 1955, then he would agree to nominate. Morton's supporters still believed they could muster sufficient support to stave off any challenge; for his part, Morton appeared not to be injecting any urgency into the process as he spent the day before the meeting playing in a bowls match he had organised between Parliamentarians and Parliament House staff. He refused to cancel it. Some efforts were made to have the meeting postponed, but Morton refused to entertain the idea.<sup>152</sup> However, Morton steadfastly refused to resign when the party met on 17 July, his resignation being sought by three members — Cox (Vaucluse), Cross (Georges River) and Black (Neutral Bay) who told Morton that he had lost the confidence of most party members. A motion to declare the leadership vacant was carried — but only narrowly — by 15 voters to 13. Black led the attack, saying that Morton lacked the qualities needed for leadership; the party needed a leader with 'more vigour and application'. Subsequent speakers were critical of Morton's outside interests, while some of his defenders claimed he was being made the scapegoat for the recent election defeat. Willis had been expected to nominate but did not do so; as it was, Askin was elected unopposed.<sup>153</sup>

The significance of Askin's comment that he was first and foremost a 'full-time parliamentarian' was lost on no one, and the first profile that appeared in print hailed him as 'one of the most politically astute members' of the parliament, and also 'one of the most popular'. Askin was seen as 'a free mixer', with 'friends in all social groups'. The change was not lost on the Labor Party either, an un-named MLA being quoted as saying: 'Bob knows some tricks in the political game, and he could make us sit up and take

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<sup>151</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 1959.

<sup>152</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 1959.

<sup>153</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1959.

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notice of the Opposition for a change'.<sup>154</sup> The *Herald*, so long accustomed to hand wringing over the Liberals' foibles, sensed a degree of closure in Askin's election when it praised 'a notable display of good sense' in his winning the post unanimously.

As Leader of the Opposition, he must not be handicapped from the beginning by the feeling that his party is not wholeheartedly behind him.

He has the immediate practical advantage that, unlike Mr Morton, he has no important private business interests to distract him from his task. He will be a full-time leader, and, judging by his performance in the past five years, should give the Cahill Government some uneasy moments. He reacts quickly, often astutely, and perceptibly more surely than Mr Morton to controversial issues as they arise. His most obvious weakness is a tendency to become obsessed with topics of very limited general interest, or to make an issue of subjects too complex to admit of scoring a political point.<sup>155</sup>

The editorial went on to hope that Askin would be given the support he needed, that petty intrigues would be abandoned, that a better Liberal attendance record would be achieved and that the Liberals would develop distinctive party policy positions. Askin was quick to signal where he was headed, saying in one of his first interviews: 'One of my main tasks will be to try to sell our ideas and principles to the average working man'. He was critical of the Liberals' use of the media, and expressed his concern that the policies of the party were not communicated effectively 'to the people who matter most — the average working man and his family'.<sup>156</sup> It was a significant shift in the party's message, and an especially timely one given the publicity that had surrounded Askin's election in relation to his atypical Liberal origins. He was courting a new constituency.

Askin was keen to be seen hitting the ground running. Very early in his leadership he promised better relations with the party organisation and with the Country Party, saying he was 'a close friend' of the new Country Party leader, Charles Cutler.<sup>157</sup> More importantly, he was going to make his voice heard, announcing that he would seek 'within the next 48 hours' a meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss 'many matters of

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<sup>154</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 1959.

<sup>155</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 1959.

<sup>156</sup> *Sun-Herald*, 19 July 1959.

<sup>157</sup> Charles Benjamin Cutler (1918- ) MLA Orange 1947-75, Deputy Premier 1965-75, Minister for Education and Science 1965-72, Minister for Local Government and Highways 1972-75, Minister for Local Government and Tourism 1975.

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mutual interest', and he was determined to show that the Liberals in New South Wales 'want to play our part in national development, particularly in this State'.<sup>158</sup>

The Liberals were more anxious than ever to drive home the message that this was a new beginning. In an address to the Liberals' convention later that year, the State President, Robert Cotton, went to great lengths to frame recent events as not being unusual, and insisted that the party organisation had not interfered. At the same time he issued a thinly veiled warning about loyalty while noting that 'leadership changes are part of the natural cycle of politics'. Contrary to popular impressions, the New South Wales Liberal Party was neither unique nor a record-breaker in this regard in the post-war years, and frequent changes had occurred in all parties in all States, except South Australia. These changes had proved to be no deterrents to success, as Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland clearly showed, and it was always the privilege and responsibility of the Parliamentary Party alone to choose its leaders.<sup>159</sup>

While the changes in leadership had been destabilising for the party, and had dampened morale, there was discernibly a new spirit at work. New recruits such as Maddison, Jago, Healey and Waddy had added to the Liberals' firepower in parliament, and more energetic leadership was beginning to show results. Members' committees were formed to develop expertise in various fields of government, and winnable electorates were identified and targeted, with members sharing specific responsibilities in them. A higher leadership profile was noticeable, as Askin and key Liberals made well publicised visits to country areas and local meetings were arranged to form and strengthen the party branch structure. Askin also set about methodically courting various groups that had been disaffected by the Labor Government, and refining and directing key messages to them through the media. These included teachers, retired railwaymen, mental patients, aborigines, small shopkeepers people hurt by high council rates, inflated land prices, expensive and congested buses, and Catholic parents deprived of direct State aid because

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<sup>158</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 1959.

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of Labor policy.<sup>160</sup> It was, as one writer has noted, a technique used by McKell and, under Askin, ‘applied with vigour’.<sup>161</sup> Askin went out of his way to demonstrate that the Liberals were sympathetic to the ordinary people, stating in Parliament: ‘As long as some sections of the community are not receiving justice, we of the Liberal Party will rise in this Chamber to state their case’.<sup>162</sup> Askin’s activism had a galvanising effect on the Liberal Party and his pragmatism proved highly contagious as commentators began to notice; the party moving from a reactionary-conservative position where ‘old-fashioned views on everything from drink to Catholics prevailed’ towards one that articulated ‘more the language of the ordinary working man’.<sup>163</sup> Quite clearly, the divisions that for so long had sapped the party’s vitality were no more: under Askin’s leadership the parliamentary party achieved an unprecedented unity.<sup>164</sup>

The Labor Party was already wary of the dangers posed by a reinvigorated Opposition under Askin’s ‘wily and competent’ leadership,<sup>165</sup> and only months after Askin’s election it lost its own best asset with the sudden death of Cahill. The death left a deep impression on Askin — a further reminder just what a tough business politics was and that the qualities required not only to survive but to succeed were not the ones with which ordinary men were imbued. Askin had been leader just four months when the Opposition moved a censure motion against the Government (which Askin had opposed in the party room) over a loan made by the Rural Bank to a large cement company.

So I had to go in there and move censure on the Government and it was a rather hectic debate, and I can remember after Mr Cahill had spoken I had to reply as Leader of the Opposition, and I was thumping the table and doing the best I could with this case and I noticed Mr Cahill looking very pale. And he was belching in a different way to the ordinary person and I could see he wasn’t too well. And I leant across the table...and I said ‘Are you all right, Joe?’ And the last words he ever spoke to me were, he said ‘Yes, get on with the bloody thing’. Those were his last words. And we adjourned about half

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<sup>159</sup> Address by Mr R. C. Cotton, NSW State President at the Annual General Convention, Fri 9 Oct 1959, Liberal Party papers, Mitchell Library, K 53643, 3.

<sup>160</sup> Clune, ‘The Labor Government’, *op. cit.*, p. 148; Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 70-1.

<sup>161</sup> Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>162</sup> *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, 21 September 1960, p. 653.

<sup>163</sup> *Bulletin* 8 September 1962; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 1961; *Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 1962.

<sup>164</sup> Clune, ‘The Labor Government’, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>165</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165.

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an hour afterwards for some reason or other...and he took worse. They took him to hospital and he died the next day. But I never forgot the late Premier's last words to me. They weren't heard by Hansard but that's what actually happened. That was him, he was blunt. A pretty blunt old place, New South Wales Parliament, popularly supposed to be the toughest of all.<sup>166</sup>

The Labor Party was taken unawares by Cahill's death, and the leadership passed to Bob Heffron, who was by then 69 years old, and had been a member of Cabinet for all of the 18 years since Labor came to office in 1941. Heffron announced he would make no deviations from the Cahill line, and portfolio changes were minimal save for one: unlike every other Premier since 1922 he handed over treasury to his deputy, Renshaw, thus 'giving up a key post for seeing what his ministers were doing and imposing some overall coherence'. If Labor was growing tired in office, as even its supporters were finding, the opportunity for a fresh start was missed.<sup>167</sup> Heffron, the one time radical, had mellowed into a 'benign great-uncle'; he was not the man to breathe new life into the Government. Even worse, he displayed as Premier a lethargy and procrastination that intensified rather than ameliorated the troubles that ailed the administration. By the end of 1959, a year in which the ALP notched up its seventh consecutive electoral success, the political landscape had changed dramatically: a strong and able leader had unified the Opposition and signalled his will to win; the Government had lost its steadying influence and allowed a dangerous drift to set in. By December, even its position in the parliament was looking shaky when it lost control of the Legislative Council when seven Labor members were expelled for crossing the floor to vote against an abolition Bill.<sup>168</sup> The times had indeed changed.

Cahill had possessed a sure instinct for political tactics; he asked for, and gave, no quarter to his opponents, whom he regarded with a professional disdain. Askin, for one, admired his political skills, but at a personal level found Cahill remote, cold and petty. As he later recounted with candor: 'I wasn't an admirer of his. I saw too much of the manoeuvring that took place'. Cahill had been able to dominate parliament in a way that Heffron never

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<sup>166</sup> Askin interview, 1:1/36.

<sup>167</sup> Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

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tried to; the combat that ensued was relaxed, another demonstration that Labor was inexorably losing its hold on power. Askin had both a warm regard for and a close friendship with Heffron ('a gentlemanly old chap'), largely established through having been deputy leaders at the same time and a number of shared interests. The upshot of this, in the New South Wales Parliament of all places, was that each contrived not to be in the House when political attack was on — a most extraordinary arrangement.

[W]hen there was likely to be a fight between the Liberal Party and the Labor Government I'd send word to Mr Heffron and he'd put somebody else in the chair, so that I wouldn't be attacking him personally. And when he was going to attack the Opposition he'd send word to me: 'You'd better have a cup of tea about four o'clock this afternoon', and we managed to get through for the whole of his term still good friends and never having had a row in the House.<sup>169</sup>

Askin and the Liberal Party had every reason to be looking with rare confidence at the next election due in 1962. The Liberals were unified at last, and an ongoing problem throughout the long years in the wilderness — relations with the Country Party — had been resolved after the resignation of the veteran leader, Bruxner, and the leadership, after a brief interregnum under Hughes,<sup>170</sup> passing to Cutler, who was both open to new ideas and enjoyed a warm relationship with Askin. The tensions between the parties had a long history, dating back to the days of the United Australia Party, which Bruxner regarded as not 'genuine' and too disparate, and constant disputes over seniority and allocation of portfolio responsibilities,<sup>171</sup> none of which happened under Askin's leadership of the coalition. On the leadership front, Askin's dynamic style in contrast with his predecessors was much commented on, as was his apparent youthfulness in comparison with Heffron and his aging Cabinet. But clouds not of Askin's making loomed on the horizon, and changes in the economic environment and the swift policy response from Canberra quickly soured that earlier confidence. What became known as the 'credit squeeze', as the Federal Government moved to contain soaring inflation, bit

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<sup>169</sup> Askin interview, 1:2/2.

<sup>170</sup> Davis Hughes succeeded Bruxner in 1958 but was forced to resign in 1959 after it was found he did not have the university degree which he claimed.

<sup>171</sup> Rodney Smith, 'New South Wales', in Jeremy Moon and Campbell Sharman (eds.), *Australian Politics and Government: The Commonwealth, the States and the Territories*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 66.

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deeply into employment<sup>172</sup> and interest rates, and Menzies escaped by the skin of his teeth at the elections in December 1961, holding on to government by a single seat. The Liberal vote nationally had plunged from just over 37 per cent in 1958 to 33.58 per cent, its lowest level since 1946. In New South Wales, in voting for the House of Representatives, it had tumbled to just under 31 per cent, which was an effective collapse of support. It was an ominous sign for the Liberals, and Askin bravely insisted the campaign would be fought on State, not national, issues.<sup>173</sup> To capitalise on the unpopularity of Menzies, Heffron went for an early election, nominating polling day as 3 March.

For a party that had come so close in 1956 and 1959 — and furthermore, a party that had to all intents and purposes healed its divisions and united behind assertive leadership — the campaign of 1962 was a poor one revealing a lack of policy work and an imperfect understanding of the political implications on certain key issues. It also failed to exploit the improved relationship with the Country Party from which it differed significantly on some key issues, notably State aid to independent schools and reform of the Legislative Council.<sup>174</sup> Ironically, attempts to further ‘modernise’ the Liberal Party and bring in fresh talent — both initiatives championed by Askin and supported by Ash Street — actually worked against the party in 1962 as local party branches and dis-endorsed members fought rearguard actions against the ‘Ash Street junta’.<sup>175</sup> One commentator and future Liberal Party leader, Peter Coleman, wrote that these ‘disagreements’ were further aggravated by a ‘new spirit of tough-minded professionalism that has swept through the

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<sup>172</sup> Unemployment peaked in February 1962 at 131,000 – the highest since the war. In NSW, some 47,000 people were without jobs or 2.9 per cent of the workforce. (*Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1962).

<sup>173</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 January 1962.

<sup>174</sup> Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>175</sup> Recent amendments to the party constitution declared that sitting members who lose endorsement could no longer oppose the successful nominee and remain in the party. Four sitting Liberals were defeated in pre-selection ballots. In Gordon, echoes of the UAP were heard when ‘loyal Liberals’ were urged to ‘preserve their right to free choice of a parliamentary representative’. (*North Shore Times*, 28 February 1962). It has been argued that attempts to further ‘professionalise’ the Liberal campaign may in fact have accentuated conflict between centre and periphery as virtual sub-conflicts inside the campaign characterised by the *Daily Telegraph* (1 May 1962) as between Ash Street and the State Council (professional versus dilettante), Ash Street and the parliamentary party (professional versus professional) and Ash Street and Liberal branches (professional versus amateur). See also Ian Campbell, ‘The 1962 Election’ in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

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NSW party over the past three years'.<sup>176</sup> In other words, Askin's leadership was having an impact on the party, but not necessarily in the ways in which it was intended.

Two key issues that clearly cost the Liberals votes in 1962 were handled ineptly — rent control and State aid. Responding to Heffron's policy speech commitment of no substantial alterations to the Landlord and Tenant Act— and hence no easing of controls — brought a response from Askin of partial de-controlling, limiting increases to 40 per cent. Labor immediately responded with claims that this would mean rises of as much as £2 a week (\$4) on a £5 (\$10) weekly rent and Askin and the party were forced to back-pedal, claiming that there would be 'no general increase' and that 'no one will suffer hardship'.<sup>177</sup> Treatt, who lost his seat of Bligh, was in an area where the issue was regarded as crucial, and he complained that attempting to explain the Liberal policy on rent control in the electorate was 'like going over Niagara in a barrel'. In another close seat, Coogee, a swing to Labor of 3.3 per cent was attributed to the issue.<sup>178</sup> On the issue of State aid, the Country Party had actually set the pace by promising loans to independent schools,<sup>179</sup> whereas Labor had its hands tied by Federal policy, and Askin was shown to be exhibiting the sort of extreme caution of which he was critical in Morton — an indication, perhaps, that he was unsure of party support on the issue and was unwilling to risk his leadership with a rash foray into the political unknown.

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<sup>176</sup> *Bulletin*, 10 February 1962.

<sup>177</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 February 1962, 1 March 1962.

<sup>178</sup> *1962 State General Elections: Appreciation* quoted in Campbell, *op. cit.* p. 395.

<sup>179</sup> See Michael Hogan, *The Catholic Campaign for State aid: A Study of a Pressure Group Campaign in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, 1950-1972*, Catholic Theological Faculty, Sydney, 1978, p. 25.

#### 4.5. Courting the Catholic Vote

**JOHN CARRICK** had for many years pondered on the issue of the Catholic vote, especially in New South Wales. Like many returned servicemen, the war years had thrown him into close contact with people of other beliefs, and this led to deep questioning of the received wisdom of the years. As an economist, Carrick was of the view that it was a mistake to regard the Catholic vote purely as a religious vote; it was more an expression of economic class, and that was becoming less relevant as prosperity spread.<sup>180</sup>

While Carrick speculated on such issues, his thought suddenly began to take on concrete form when Menzies sought his help in the mid-1950s as the Federal Government embarked on the move of government departments from Melbourne to Canberra, and the problem of schooling in the Australian Capital Territory, then a Commonwealth responsibility, became a critical issue for Menzies. Parents of school age children came to Canberra and faced an impossible situation. Many were Catholics and tried to get into what little Catholic schooling there was, but there was no room for them. So they approached the Federal Government, and as Menzies explained to Carrick, he faced a real dilemma: either he would have to expand the State schools in a very big way or try to do something for the non-government schools. Carrick said it was wrong at that stage to see Menzies manoeuvring politically,<sup>181</sup> as has been suggested: his basic instinct was a belief in freedom of choice. If anything, there were very real dangers of a sectarian backlash.

It was certainly not a vote winner in those days. Later, it became so. The benefits, of course, were ten, fifteen years down the track. At the time, though, it just seemed the right thing to do. I remember Menzies saying to me to go and see Eris O'Brien, then

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<sup>180</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>181</sup> Menzies was remarkably consistent, as well as cautious, in his stance on State aid. As early as 1943, outlining a vision for postwar education, he spoke of the need to maintain ‘...Church schools, of whatever denomination...’ The idea of attracting Catholic votes was not even on the political horizon. Menzies here was using what one commentator identified as ‘both the freedom of choice argument and the economic argument used by Catholic spokesmen’’. (See Hogan, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18).

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Archbishop of Canberra-Goulburn, and I remember to this day his words: 'Come and chew a chop with me, old boy.' I was to chew many chops with him. He said to be: 'You know, the trouble with we tykes and you bigoted Protestants is that we are remote. Look, if you are going down the street and you pass one of our schools and see the nuns in the playground, hop the fence and have a chat to them. The old girls will love it.' That was the basic situation. We started by interest subsidies – they borrowed money and we paid a subsidy to cover their interest. It was good policy, good unifying policy – but still unpopular in some circles, very unpopular. That started a train of thinking, but the ALP platform was strongly opposed to State aid. Then Menzies moved into science blocks, libraries and so on. As he did these things, an interesting evolution occurred in this country: whereas you had generations of Catholic families who had been told by their grandfathers that all Protestants had two heads, and in any case Protestants hated Catholics and wanted to keep them down, people started to say 'I think that's wrong. Look, he's helping me. What is more, I am moving up the economic ladder.'<sup>182</sup>

After the close call in 1959, Carrick began to focus even more on the Catholic vote, increasingly seeing it as the key to electoral victory in New South Wales. In his detailed analysis of the election, he noted a general State-wide trend away from Labor that was significantly arrested in four key seats which the Liberals had to win to secure office — North Sydney, Ryde, Concord and Rockdale. The explanation, said a Liberal Party State Council Committee report smacking very strongly of Carrick, for the reverse swing appeared to be that in the key seats, a 'successful attempt was made by Labor to secure the bulk of the RC vote'.

In a well-organised discriminate personal canvass, [ALP] campaigners used the spurious but superficially attractive argument that the Cahill Government should be preserved as a foil against Federal Labor...These tactics were helped by the fact that the DLP had no firm pretext for its establishment in NSW...Furthermore, the predominantly Protestant characteristic of Liberal candidates tended, naturally enough, to repel a number of moderate RC voters. The Committee is convinced that the past tendency of a majority of RC voters to support the Labor Party emerged rather as an accidental by-product of the migration trend in the late 19th century, than as a politically contrived factor. It is apparent that as persons reach a stage of moderate economic security they tend to become conservative. It is further apparent that the socialist and communist issues arising from the 1949 Federal Elections and subsequent campaigns have caused many Right-wing Roman Catholic voters to support the Liberal and Country parties...These issues have been decisive, both in the Federal elections and in elections in the States...In the 1959 NSW State Elections this trend did not occur...<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>183</sup> Report of the State Council Committee elected to review and report on the 1959 State Elections, Liberal Party papers, ML, MS 2385, K 5319, 8.

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Just why this did not occur was itself the subject of further analysis as Carrick and the committee further investigated the DLP vote.

1. The link between Fed and State Labor had not been firmly established in the electors' minds by the State Liberal Party.
2. There had been a failure to establish that the DLP was a positive anti-communist force.
3. There was failure to expose Cahill's lack of courage in facing up to communism.
4. Whilst the Liberal Party is non-sectarian, it has failed to make this fact known with sufficient emphasis within the community.<sup>184</sup>

The issue of State aid had come more to the fore by the time of the 1962 election, but it was still a potentially explosive and divisive issue for the Liberal Party — a fact keenly appreciated by Askin. Carrick's reference to the policy being 'very unpopular' in 'some circles' was simply code for sectarian tendencies within the Liberal Party. The fact that the Country Party had already taken a stance in favour did not make matters any easier, but it is interesting that the Country Party in its internal argument saw not only its own constituency being served over greater numbers of non-urban children attending boarding schools as a result of school rationalisation but also the opportunity to detach Catholic votes from Labor.<sup>185</sup> Despite ample precedent existing in the Federal Liberals' policy towards Catholic schools in the ACT, Liberals in New South Wales, Askin in particular, were cautious in the extreme about reversing their policy, most likely an indication of continuing internal fragility.<sup>186</sup> Some Liberals, however, were not so diffident. Wal Fife (Wagga Wagga) encouraged the activity of the Wagga Parents' and Friends' Association in his own electorate, attended a meeting organised by them in later 1961 and even offered to distribute the speech delivered there by a Jesuit priest to all State Liberal members. Other members including Kevin Ellis (Coogee) and Ken McCaw (Lane Cove) openly favoured a policy of State aid along the Menzies line, but Askin's response was as cautious as it was pragmatic, telling one delegation that he could make such a promise

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Hogan, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

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only if the Catholic vote could be effectively delivered to the Liberals.<sup>187</sup> Askin's caution was clearly in response to mounting tensions within the Liberal Party; in addition, the inauspicious electoral climate given the Federal Coalition's unpopularity would have made him well aware given recent precedents that his leadership in the event of an electoral defeat was by no means secure. He had, after all, not manoeuvred and fought his way to the top, championing Robson as a foil before being able to see off Morton, just to jeopardise his hold on the leadership for a high-risk policy gamble that might well cost him more support than he would gain.<sup>188</sup> However, he was by no means blind to the need for the Liberals to have greater electoral appeal to Catholics and to have greater Catholic representation, especially in public positions, within the party. He argued this forcefully at a meeting of the Parliamentary Party as early as November 1960 — a meeting described as 'long and heated',<sup>189</sup> and at which Askin had ample opportunity to gauge the strength of the diehards, which was considerable. Press reports in the months leading up to the 1962 election hinted at the tensions within Liberal ranks, describing 'a secret Liberal Party Committee' chaired by McCaw, recommending by majority report a policy of State aid,<sup>190</sup> but the parliamentary party declined to endorse the decision.<sup>191</sup> Askin had planned to mention that State aid was not part of the policy, but at the last minute he deleted this reference, apparently after the Liberal State President, Ralph Honner, himself a prominent Catholic layman, had threatened to walk off the platform in protest.<sup>192</sup> Pragmatically, as it turned out, Askin had kept his policy options open.

The issue, however, continued to simmer. Vociferous opponents within the party, such as C. M. Usher, continued to rail against State aid as being 'neither desirable nor consistent with Liberal philosophy',<sup>193</sup> while the party's official appreciation of the 1962 campaign and defeat lamented the failure 'to detach the Right Wing Labor vote in key

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<sup>187</sup> *ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>188</sup> This possibility was also raised by a prominent Catholic educator, the Reverend John Kelly. *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 October 1962.

<sup>189</sup> *The Observer*, 7 January 1961.

<sup>190</sup> *Nation*, 10 February 1962.

<sup>191</sup> *Sun, Daily Mirror*, 14 February 1962.

<sup>192</sup> Hogan, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-4; *Sunday Mirror*, 29 April 1962.

<sup>193</sup> *The Australian Liberal*, May 1962, p. 16.

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seats...'<sup>194</sup> Carrick, for his part, nursed his considerable disappointment at the policy opportunity that went begging in 1962, focusing instead on differences with the Country Party over key policy issues.

The most significant factor was the differing coalition policies of assistance to private schools, particularly as the issue was one which featured strongly in the Press in the weeks immediately prior to the intensive campaign and the Liberal policy remained a matter of intense speculation.<sup>195</sup>

There is little doubt that Askin supported State aid as policy, but he did not underestimate the entrenched opposition within the Liberal Party. Meanwhile, the issue had been thrust into the headlines with the closure of six Catholic schools in Goulburn after Catholic authorities said there was no money to enable compliance with State standards, and almost two thousand pupils were instructed to seek admission to State schools.<sup>196</sup> Later in 1962, when a committee of the Liberal Party delivered its report on education eight of its 14 members advocated a policy of State aid on the Menzies model. Several members, including Askin, absented themselves from the critical vote, and when the report went to the Parliamentary Liberal Party it was once again rejected.<sup>197</sup> The following year Askin showed his hand a little more boldly when he approved a strong parliamentary speech by a prominent pro-State aid advocate, Ben Doig (Burwood), proposing direct aid on the Menzies model as recommended in the committee's 1962 guidelines. It was clearly an inspired kite-flying exercise, and no immediate hostile reaction was apparent.<sup>198</sup> Yet reaction was to come in another form as 'a silently opening rift in the New South Wales Liberal Party suddenly gaped before the public eye...'. In June 1964 Doig was defeated in a pre-selection ballot, sparking his immediate resignation from the party and blaming his loss of endorsement on supporting what was now, in the wake of the Menzies triumph in 1963 when he announced government subsidies for the construction of science blocks, in line with Federal party policy. The pre-selection itself was a bitter affair, and led to a

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<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>195</sup> Report of the State Council Committee elected to review and report on the 1962 State Elections, Liberal Party papers, ML, MS 2385, K 5319.

<sup>196</sup> See Hogan, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-72.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

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focus on a virulent anti-State aid faction within the Liberal Party.<sup>199</sup> But two factors were at work to dilute the opposition: the Menzies success in 1963 and the internal wrangling of the ALP whose left-dominated Federal Executive remained adamantly opposed to State aid. Thus by the time of the 1965 election, Askin was able to announce a wide-ranging State aid policy, and an energetic lobby group called the Association for Educational Freedom distributed its journal outside churches urging Catholics in key electorate to vote against the ALP.<sup>200</sup>

Askin's caution is easily understood in light of the potential of the issue to ignite already simmering divisions in his own party. While Protestants at large were opposed by a margin of 3-2 to the principle of State aid, according to public opinion polls,<sup>201</sup> a far greater degree of opposition was evident among Protestant clergy<sup>202</sup>, lay organisations and associations of State school teachers. Behind the generic argument that Catholic parents could avoid the double financial burden by sending their children to State schools, lurked two other issues: there were very few Protestant schools and they were mostly attended by the children of wealthy parents; and among the opposition to State aid was 'a measure of plain anti-Catholic prejudice'.<sup>203</sup> That bigotry was prevalent. Writing in 1963, Peter Coleman spoke of a 'traditional prejudice against Catholics'. He recorded how in a report of an interview with one Liberal leader who said he favoured State aid 'both he and I received a stream of abusive letters'.<sup>204</sup>

While Askin might have taken comfort in the Menzies experiment he would have been well aware of the tensions that created in the Federal party where Menzies was forced to

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<sup>199</sup> *Nation*, 13 June 1964.

<sup>200</sup> Chris Puplick, 'The 1965 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

<sup>201</sup> Australian Gallup Polls (AGP), nos. 1093-1102, June-July 1955; nos 1492-1503, October-December 1960; nos. 1531-1546, May-August, 1961; nos. 1558-1580, November 1961-January 1962. Cited in Henry S. Albinski, *The Australian Labor Party and the Aid to Parochial Schools Controversy*, Penn State Studies, No. 19, Pennsylvania State University, 1966, p. 6, fn 17.

<sup>202</sup> See, for example, the views of the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Gough, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 9, 1962.

<sup>203</sup> Albinski, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>204</sup> Peter Coleman, 'The Liberal and Country Parties: Platforms, Policies and Performance', *Forces in Australian Politics*, (Australian Institute of Political Science, Proceedings of 29<sup>th</sup> Summer School), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, pp. 15-16.

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resort to regulation rather than any explicit legislative enactment.<sup>205</sup> Several key Liberals, including senior ministers, were known to strongly oppose the 1956 Commonwealth gesture,<sup>206</sup> while others agitated for a free vote in parliament. One even claimed that any form of State aid agreed to by the Liberals would wreck the party.<sup>207</sup> So fraught with political peril was the issue that even Menzies himself, at the height of his power and influence, avoided responding to a question in 1960 on whether his government favoured financial assistance to independent schools.<sup>208</sup> In 1963, when he made his move for political reasons, Menzies effectively forced the State Liberal parties to toe the line. As Rydon notes, they accepted Menzies' policy (though not without disputes) on what had been 'a State question and on which several of them had been seriously divided'.<sup>209</sup>

The risk in 1962 was simply too great for even a risk-taker like Askin who would have been keenly aware of how contentious the issue was within the Liberal Party just as he was conscious of how his leadership could be destabilised by giving vent to those tensions. There was also speculation that Askin was among those Liberals who believed 1962 was already unwinnable and not worth risking party unity over.<sup>210</sup>

By 1965 the tide had turned and a noticeable change in public attitudes was apparent. Even so vociferous an opponent of State aid as Anglican Primate, Dr Hugh Gough, had moderated his views to the extent that he was able to publicly support the Commonwealth's science aid to non-government schools.<sup>211</sup> Intra-party tensions again intervened — but this time in the ALP with the party's Federal Executive reminding NSW that a mooted subsidy plan for school text books violated party policy.<sup>212</sup> This opened the door for Askin and the Liberals to drive a wedge into Labor's support base, more than matching the ALP in indirect State aid and committing to a policy of direct aid

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<sup>205</sup> Albinski, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>206</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 November 1956.

<sup>207</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1961.

<sup>208</sup> Albinski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>209</sup> Joan Rydon, *The Federal Structure of Australian Political Parties*, Working Papers in Australian Studies, LaTrobe, 1986, p. 7.

<sup>210</sup> *Bulletin*, 5 June 1965.

<sup>211</sup> Albinski, *op. cit.*, p. 29; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1964.

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as the Commonwealth had done in the ACT — that is, subsidised interest on loans for capital construction. Askin's position was far stronger than in 1962, and despite some misgivings in his own ranks, this time he prevailed and went to the electorate with an attractive policy whose time had arrived.<sup>213</sup> Askin had clearly read the political wind, albeit with a degree of opportunism. As Albinski observed: 'In 1965...for the first time, the electorate was generally conditioned for and even enthusiastic about State aid'.<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, when the Liberals gained power at the 1965 election, 'Labor's most pronounced electoral decline was registered in heavily Catholic areas, whether working class suburbs or not'.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Albinski, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>213</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>214</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

#### 4.6. Victory at Last

**LABOR** replaced the ageing Heffron in 1964 with Jack Renshaw, a member of parliament since 1941 and widely regarded as a sound Treasurer under Heffron, but doubts persisted as to whether he was the right man to revive the flagging fortunes of a government widely perceived to be tired and decrepit.<sup>216</sup> Askin, however, now entering his second election campaign as leader was a refreshing face for the Liberals, seen in some quarters even as ‘almost more of a traditional Labor-style leader than the somewhat more urbane and thoughtful Jack Renshaw’. Askin portrayed himself as a ‘man of the people’, a bit of a larrikin, a gambler and a drinker with an ordinary background, AIF sergeant, bank officer — in sharp contrast to the aloof Rhodes Scholar and barrister Treatt, ex-senior army officer and socialite Robson and wealthy businessman Morton.<sup>217</sup>

The pairing of the austere intellectual Carrick and the gregarious knockabout Askin was an unlikely one, as Askin’s one-time campaign manager, Chris Puplick, was to recall.

There could hardly have been less in common in terms of style and personality between Askin and...Carrick. Askin was a gregarious man, a heavy gambler, a noted punter, a solid drinker and, if the majority of his critics are to be believed, of doubtful personal integrity. Carrick was a deeply intellectual man, cool and dispassionate, aesthetic, a non-drinker and, although he never minded a few dollars in a poker machine, would not have been seen at a race track...

Askin’s political activities were all instinctive. Carrick’s essentially rational, although both had great ‘feel’ for the electoral pulse. Askin was a pragmatist with no great ideological convictions or sense of vision. Carrick was a visionary who saw the process of politics as all about making changes for the better. Askin’s was a view tempered by the nature of his war service — a sergeant in the regular AIF in New Guinea and Borneo; Carrick’s war service was as an officer in the horrors of Changi.<sup>218</sup>

Yet for all these differences — not to mention the friction over personal style which saw Askin, much to Carrick’s dismay, carry a wad of notes in his pocket and dole out to candidates as he saw fit<sup>219</sup> — it was a remarkably successful pairing, mirroring in some

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<sup>216</sup> Puplick, *op. cit.*, p. 433.

<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*, p. 434.

<sup>218</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 435-6.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, p. 436.

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ways the evolution of the Liberal Party from interest group to mass party, and Carrick remained unstinting in his praise of Askin, long after the latter's death.

Askin, once he knew what he had to do after making the mistakes in '62, he took a practical approach, a sensible approach to everything...I would give Askin full marks for his policies. He picked the policies out of the grab bag the party had thrown up over a period. He looked at the small shopkeeper kind of show; he looked at the little man who was being picked on with regulations and so on. So he was using things that had irritated people from the end of the war, and he used it and got what he deserved...With Askin we had a person whom we thought would be acceptable to what we called the little voter. That was our campaign theme. It was quite authentic; he was very naturally inclined that way. He did some television which would be frowned on today: talking to the camera, addressing the voter.<sup>220</sup>

The harnessing of the Carrick-Askin synergy in 1965 saw new benchmarks established in the arena of political campaigning, mounting an expensive and sophisticated campaign that was both 'energetic and clever', integrating as it did both the Federal and State parties, projecting the leader in a favourable light and balancing the policy appeal to a wide range of voters.

In this respect it is the precursor of most modern, successful election campaigns. In jargon that was not current back in 1965 it was remarkably targeted at both special interest groups and key marginal electorates. In its use of television it was the first genuinely successful attempt by the Liberals to exploit the new medium. The Coalition partners ran a joint campaign for the first time and the result was a personal triumph for Carrick, Cutler and especially for Askin who had succeeded where Treatt, Robson and Morton had failed.<sup>221</sup>

The Liberal Party, and Carrick in particular, were aware that they had a leader who could be presented to the electorate in a way that none of his predecessors could — as a man of the people, a champion of the 'little people' against big, insensitive government; a man clearly comfortable among the people. For these reasons, Askin himself became the focus of the Liberal campaign in a dynamic slogan used often — 'Askin for Action'. With a keen eye for the complex multiplicity of political messages, the campaign teased out the folksy 'Bob' Askin, rather than the more formal and remote 'R. W.' Askin. The

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<sup>220</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>221</sup> Puplick, *op. cit.*, pp. 461-2.

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Liberal Party name, as Puplick has noted, was played down, largely due to a legacy of electoral and leadership instability in New South Wales.<sup>222</sup>

The political climate in 1965 was altogether different from that which had prevailed at the time of the 1962 election, and a clear lesson from that year was that no State election could be held in isolation from the general political situation as prevailed at the Federal level.<sup>223</sup> The economic rough weather that had led to a significant swing against the Federal Liberals in 1961 had passed, prosperity had returned and Menzies, ever the opportunist, had seized the opportunity to go to the polls a year early in 1963 and scored a resounding victory. The upward trend continued on into 1964 when at the separate half-Senate election the Coalition captured the third seat in New South Wales, outpolling the ALP by some 37,000 votes or almost 2 per cent.<sup>224</sup> The brief resurgence by Labor in 1961 has vanished, and Menzies had inflicted a mortal wound on the Federal leader, Arthur Calwell, with his studied jibe that Calwell took his orders from the '36 faceless men' who made up the Labor supreme body, and were championing a leftist foreign and defence policy. The situation was given graphic public exposure by the publication in a newspaper of Calwell and his deputy, Gough Whitlam, pictured waiting outside a Canberra hotel while the 'faceless men' deliberated inside.

Askin's political instincts came to the fore in the 1965 campaign as he displayed a keen populist sense for the disaffected, picking up as someone once remarked, all those who fell off the government bus as it turned and bumped at every corner and pot hole. In some respects, the appeal of Askin in New South Wales in 1965 was similar to that of Bolte in Victoria in 1955 and Menzies to Australia in 1949, as the years of ALP rule there had been characterised by some tight and unpopular controls, and in Victoria notably shop trading hours. With more women in the workforce there was pressure for greater flexibility in shopping hours, but the industrial wing of Labor, most notably the Shop Assistants' Union, stood firmly against any liberalisation on the grounds that it would

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<sup>222</sup> *ibid.* p. 452.

<sup>223</sup> *ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>224</sup> Hughes & Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

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undermine hard-won working conditions. Indeed, the 1960 annual conference of the ALP in New South Wales went even further than merely blocking reform: it endorsed the party's Industrial Committee's report congratulating the Government for preserving conditions and encouraging it to prosecute offenders. A belated attempt to extend trading hours for women's hairdressers on Thursdays (but only after some hairdressers said they would go to jail rather than pay fines) did not stem heavy-handed policing of the hours issue.<sup>225</sup>

The shop hours issue was one that resonated with the public, and was taken up by an enthusiastic press; it was cleverly exploited by Askin to show that not only were unions dictating to the Government, but that the Government itself was powerless to respond to demands for change. This was, for Askin, fortuitously exacerbated in the run-up to the 1965 election when bakers were prevented from baking fresh bread for the long Easter break. It was an attitude that the *Daily Telegraph* characterised as 'to hell with the public'.<sup>226</sup> The paper provided letter space to the secretary of the Amalgamated Independent Traders' Association of New South Wales to outline the shopkeepers' case.

The facts are that the small storekeepers cannot generally speaking operate financially and meet the public's requirements if they comply completely with the present law, which requires most of their groceries and domestic lines to be shuttered and padlocked at 5.30 p.m. daily, 12 noon Saturday and all day Sunday.<sup>227</sup>

It was an entrenched attitude by Labor that was both archaic and inconvenient, and as a political target it meshed nicely with Askin's depiction of the Government as old and out of touch. The *Telegraph* was fulsome in its endorsement of Askin's policy speech that addressed these concerns.

The people of New South Wales, sick of the 'to hell with the public' attitude of the State Labor Government, will see Mr Askin's policy speech as a charter for a better and more comfortable existence.

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<sup>225</sup> Hagan & Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>226</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1965.

<sup>227</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1965.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

He undertook not only to make life more comfortable and rewarding but to remove the petty restrictions and pin-prickings which Labor politicians delight to inflict on the community.

Mr Askin did not promise anything he could not deliver.

In outlining the Liberals' plans, he threw into greater relief the appalling 24-year-old inadequacies of the Labor Government's approach to the vital problems of transport, education, shopping hours and home-building...

The refreshing aspect of Mr Askin's policy speech is that his aims are clear and positive.

He wants not only to lead NSW on to greater things as Australia's No 1 State – he wants also to cut away the red tape and remove the pinpricks which beset us.

His aim, as revealed in his fresh and challenging policy speech, is to make our life not only more prosperous, but more comfortable.<sup>228</sup>

In what was decidedly a new-style campaign for Australian elections, Askin was clearly the star performer. Television advertisements showed Askin and his wife, Mollie, out shopping together and relaxing at home; he was projected as a 'warm, friendly fellow'.<sup>229</sup> Askin was portrayed as youthful and dynamic (in contradistinction to Labor's staid tiredness), and the message was carefully pitched at the coalition of disaffected minorities which Askin had assiduously cultivated — public servants, railway widows, police officers, small shopkeepers, and animal lovers among others.<sup>230</sup> Quite clearly, these were people to whom Askin could, and did, relate — a latter-day example of Menzies' forgotten people. In a series of profiles in the largely sympathetic Sydney press, Askin was presented as a man who had fought his way up from modest beginnings, but was still one of the people — 'essentially a quietly-spoken man with a ready laugh, fond of a joke'. His concerns, too, were practical ones, and what worried him most was the 'chronic shortage of housing'. Reporters dwelt on Askin's own early life and revisited his pledge, when first elected leader in 1959, that he would strive to get his party's policy across to the working man.

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<sup>228</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14 April 1965.

<sup>229</sup> Puplick, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*, p. 437.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

He claims with pride that he had led the Liberal Party away from the far Right towards the Centre where it can appeal to all sections of the community – business men, the middle-class of white-collar men, and the average working man and woman.

He does not think there is a future in Australia for any party which is either extreme Right or extreme Left.

He describes himself as a middle-of-the-road-man, a centre-thinker, or more precisely as being 10 per cent right of centre.<sup>231</sup>

It was a close result with the coalition just squeezing in by the narrowest of margins, winning a combined 47 seats to Labor's 45, and with two Independents. The Liberals picked up the seats of Bligh and Coogee in Sydney's east, Hurstville in the south, Nepean on the outer fringes of Sydney, Monaro in the State's south-east and Wollongong-Kembla, while the Country Party picked up Goulburn.

None of the incoming ministers had served in government before, and Askin was anxious to quickly capitalise on the 'action' theme of his election campaign. Within days of the new Government taking office he made sure one of his campaign pledges was publicly seen to be honoured — the restoration of direct air services between Sydney and Dubbo, curtailed after a dispute between the Commonwealth and the former Labor Government over the control of intrastate aviation.<sup>232</sup> He was also anxious not to alarm the public service which for a generation had served only Labor, and made it his business to advise his new ministers to be tactful and not sack any public servants because the new Government needed their loyalty.<sup>233</sup> It was also a key constituency that he had assiduously courted, and he was not about to see it lost after one election. He was also acutely aware that industrial relations was a potential minefield for his new administration, and that some of his ministers had views that differed significantly from his own. A hardline approach to industrial relations, he reasoned, would do little to consolidate the coalition's hard-won victory.

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<sup>231</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 1965.

<sup>232</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1965.

<sup>233</sup> Tom Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

First of all I tried to make it my business, when I came to office, to bring my Government and my parties closer to the centre than they had been. They had been, in my view, too far to the Right...New South Wales has something like 42 per cent of the factory workers for Australia, which is another way of saying that we have the working class vote here more than in any other State...We are the industrial State and it follows that any party here that's going to try and win government and hold government has to have policies which are directed to a large extent towards the middle class working people, because there are so many of them in this State. And I believe this is primarily why my Government [*sic.*] was out of office for 24 years from 1941 to 1965, that we were too far to the Right and didn't worry enough about the industrial movement and working class people generally, especially the moderate types of workers and unionists. We knew we wouldn't get very many from the extreme militant unions, but I believed, and it proved to be right, that there was a big field for us amongst the moderate unions; and we went after them and we got them, and that's why we got into office and stayed there.<sup>234</sup>

Askin had no qualms about talking to union leaders; his preferred method of negotiation during industrial disputes was to invite them to his office and talk, coats off, man to man. It was a language that Askin understood; indeed, it was a language that he himself had used as a onetime union official: he understood the argy bargy of industrial negotiation. Furthermore, he established a personal rapport with senior union officials that was a rarity on his side of politics. As Askin put it: 'I had no trouble talking to them, none whatever. And in fact I know that on a personal basis, I know they liked me'. In what must have been a first for as Liberal Premier, he even ventured into the inner sanctum of the Trades Hall itself, discussing matters of state over 'a few glasses of beer'. The union officials must have been emboldened by this new-found intimacy because on one visit they complained to him about the state of the old building, and asked him if he could help with funds for a new building, which he agreed to and did.<sup>235</sup>

As the head of government, Askin effected a decidedly hands-off management style. He had chosen the Cabinet and allocated the portfolios; the rest was up to the ministers in whom he placed complete faith. There were certain aspects to his daily routine that not even chairing a Cabinet meeting would be allowed to change, as one of his ministers recalled.

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<sup>234</sup> Askin interview, 1:2/21-2.

<sup>235</sup> Askin interview, 1:2/22-3.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

He was very good. He let most people have their head, but it got interrupted when the papers were brought in with the acceptances for the races. So most of the time, or the last hour or so, he'd be going through the horses. He let everybody have their say and very rarely did we have a vote.<sup>236</sup>

Askin's man management skills, if a trifle unorthodox were nevertheless successful. He left an interviewer in 1972 in no doubt who was in control when he was asked how his 'team system' worked.

I've worked on a system – and it's worked pretty satisfactorily – of leaving it to the responsible Minister to handle the affairs within his department. If I find they're not moving quickly enough or that they're on the wrong track, I don't hesitate to get in touch with them privately and tell them, and I invariably get results.<sup>237</sup>

If Askin gave the impression of benign detachment at home, it was not an image that he took away with him. His Western Australian Liberal counterpart for most of his term as Premier, Sir David Brand, sat up and took immediate notice of the New South Wales newcomer in 1965, and found him 'a most worthy representative' of the senior State which, by tradition, led proceedings for the States in discussion with the Commonwealth at the Premiers' Conferences. He found Askin to be 'very sincere' and in contrast to the relaxed style he liked to present, a hard worker.<sup>238</sup> Tom Lewis, who succeeded Askin as Premier, took careful note of the way in which Askin chose not to get involved at a detail level.

He never interfered with your running of a portfolio. What he said was if you can't do it, you get out. I remember Bill (Davis) Hughes, we had offices next door to one another, came and said he was going to see Bob about trouble with the Opera House and he said to me 'you should come'. Hughes often talked his problems over with me, so we went to see Bob and first thing he said was 'have a cup of tea, scones, whatever'. Then he said after three-quarters of an hour 'you'll have to go now, I have another deputation'. Well, we had hardly said a thing about the Opera House, and when we got back to our rooms Bill said to me: 'What did you make of that?' I said we run the bloody thing and he will tell us if he doesn't like it. He didn't want to make a contribution at all.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Tom Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

<sup>237</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1972.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Sir David Brand by Joan Ambrose, June-July 1977, Oral History project, National library of Australia, TRC 548, 3:1/24.

<sup>239</sup> Tom Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

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From the time he acceded to the leadership in 1959 Askin knew how to watch his back, especially considering the record of leadership instability that dogged the Liberals throughout the 1950s. When brawls erupted within Liberal ranks, as they certainly did over the disendorsement of sitting members, Doig (Burwood) and Darby (Manly), Askin absented himself from the fray, writing diplomatically to the Manly candidate that the ‘Campaign Committee is very strongly of the opinion that I should keep out of Manly and Burwood...I was a little disappointed, but I recognise the merit of what they say...’<sup>240</sup> As a good mixer, Askin made himself freely available to all his members – a practice that he continued into government, as Tom Lewis recalled.

What he had and I didn’t have was that he made time to see and talk to everyone and, while one shouldn’t think ill of the dead, he gave them all heart to make them think that they were going to be the next Cabinet Minister. It didn’t matter who they were, he’d say ‘Not this time but I’ve got my eye on you...boom...boom..boom...’ Well, when I became Premier I never worried about all that, but he did. And that was part of his success. He was never challenged, and changing it from Pat [Morton] made a real difference..Even Pat said he was terrific.<sup>241</sup>

While relations with the Country Party had been prickly in the past, Askin forged a solid and warm relationship with Charles Cutler, the Country Party leader. Cutler, a genial fellow, had to juggle between a meeting of his own party before Cabinet met, and he needed to get in a quick word with Askin in between, a task he found difficult as Askin was often preoccupied with papers and documents. On one morning early in the life of the new Government, Cutler noticed a decanter of port in the Premier’s room and suggested, by way of diversion, that they have a glass. Thus, according to Lewis, a tradition was born. It was symptomatic of the improved relationship; the fact that many men in both parties had served in the war (See Table 8 below) enabled a camaraderie to develop that might otherwise have not.

I think the country members of the Liberal Party got on better with the Country Party than they did with the Liberal Party. It was country versus city. Somebody remarked, and it

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<sup>240</sup> Letter Askin to Higgs, 15 March 1965, quoted in R. J. Lucy, ‘The Liberal Campaign – How American?’ in John Power (ed.) *Politics in a Suburban Community: The NSW State Election in Manly, 1965*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1968, p. 104.

<sup>241</sup> Tom Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

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might have been Charlie Cutler, who I have a lot of admiration for, that most of us – maybe three quarters – of Cabinet were ex-service and we had to learn in the services to work together for a common cause, and so we knew what loyalty was all about. I think that was a great help.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Tom Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

**Table 8. The Askin Cabinet (1965) and Military Service**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Military Service</b>	<b>Officer or Ranks</b>
Robin Askin	<b>Yes</b>	Ranks
Charles Cutler	<b>Yes</b>	Officer
Eric Willis	<b>Yes</b>	Ranks
Arthur Bridges	No	
William Chaffey	<b>Yes</b>	Officer
Kenneth McCaw	No	
Philip Morton	No	
Davis Hughes	<b>Yes</b>	Officer
Milton Morris	No	
John Fuller	No	
Thomas Lewis	<b>Yes</b>	Officer
Jack Beale	No	
Stanley Stephens	<b>Yes</b>	Ranks
Harry Jago	<b>Yes</b>	Officer
Wallace Fife	No	
John Maddison	<b>Yes</b>	Officer

#### 4.7. The Public Askin

**THE IMAGE** projected by Askin was one consistent with his campaigning before he became Premier: dynamic, imaginative, hard working, business like. While reluctant to hold formal press conferences<sup>243</sup> — a reluctance that would work against his image later in his term — he was by no means averse to speaking with individual journalists, and he received a generally favourable press. For example, early in his first term he visited Melbourne (by train) where the idea of a non-Labor Premier from New South Wales was still a rarity, and he was described in a flattering profile in the mass circulation *Sun News-Pictorial* as ‘the political drought-breaker’ [for the Liberals] who was ‘friendly with (you think) guileless blue eyes’. No doubt evoking memories of ten years before in then Labor-governed Victoria, he talked of his campaign on hairdressing trading hours and shopping hours generally, observing: ‘Small corner shopkeepers were being pounced on by inspectors and sent to gaol if they wouldn’t pay their fines’. Here was the battlers’ hero with a breathless reform agenda, taming a city Melbourne folk regarded as akin to 1930s Chicago.

It struck people as being pretty wrong in this day and age if a man could go to gaol for selling a tin of meat after hours.

Women’s hairdressers were being fined for giving a perm outside ordinary hours.

The police were under-staffed. Women and children were being attacked. Women were afraid to stay at home alone if their husbands were away...

My word! Parliament hasn’t assembled yet but we’ve already done some of these things by regulation.

We’re making wealthier tenants cough up more rent. We’ve cut out the mid-city section in Sydney and ended the towaway system. We’ll make small shop hours easier. We’ve appointed a Royal Commission into rates.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> According to a writer in *The Australian*, Askin had given but three press conferences in a year, one of them to announce the election date, (15 February 1968).

<sup>244</sup> *Sun News-Pictorial*, 14 August 1965.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

Two years into his first term, the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an article detailing a typical working day in the Premier's life, infused as it was with undertones of suburban ordinariness as the newly-risen Premier 'opens the windows and doors, brings in the milk bottles and takes a short stroll around the garden'. Then he goes through the newspapers and listens to the radio news while briefing himself for the day ahead and taking calls from journalists and, later, constituents. There is always the paperwork that he carries with him, and he reveals how he had had 'a special light...fitted in the car so that he can read papers at night without disturbing the driver'. A swim in summer, a Rugby League match on Saturday afternoons and an occasional race meeting 'are Mr Askin's only relaxations'. Asked about a statement that week by the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, in relation to the withdrawal of British forces from the Far East, that many Australians lived in a 'lotus land', Askin indulged in some home-spun philosophy about times changing.

We are in the middle of a transitional stage from the old order of 'down with the boss'. The worker realises that by co-operating with the boss he can get what he wants for his wife and children.

Management too has changed. It no longer looks on the workforce as something from which to squeeze the maximum effort at the lowers rates of pay.

Management knows that increased production and turn-over follow a fair return for labour and the provision of safe and congenial working conditions.

The challenges and competition in our society keep worker and management on the job. Those who drift along in lotus land go under.<sup>245</sup>

Askin thought that his approach and style in his first term had given New South Wales 'leadership and drive',<sup>246</sup> and Askin ensured that his style of campaigning reinforced his image as a progressive, reforming leader. Still conscious of the need to draw contrasts rather than comparisons with Labor, Askin deliberately broke with tradition in 1968 by delivering his policy speech not, as had been traditional, at a meeting in a public hall, but by a pre-recorded presentation broadcast on radio and television and the text distributed to the press.<sup>247</sup> Soon after the triumph of his re-election, Askin set off on another well-

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<sup>245</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 1967.

<sup>246</sup> *Australian Liberal*, February 1968.

<sup>247</sup> Robert Dempsey, 'The 1968 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

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publicised overseas tour, visiting the United States, Ireland, Britain, Greece, Italy, Switzerland and Hong Kong – his second promotional trip since taking office. On his return he spoke of the opportunities for promoting New South Wales, especially regarding migration.<sup>248</sup> Askin was careful never to move too far from the basic issues that mostly concerned people, reminding the electorate in 1970 that it was ‘not until a Liberal Government was elected that the sewerage problem was really tackled’.<sup>249</sup> In 1972, as he overtook Joe Cahill’s record as the longest-serving Premier of New South Wales, Askin nominated his success in attracting ‘our share of the big mass of middle-class voters’ as an event of significance, which he had promised before he had been elected leader, and he also reflected on what the average voter wanted.

I believe that overwhelmingly he wants security – security in his job, home, health and old age. I have done my best to provide that, and I take some pride in the improvements I have made especially in the fields of superannuation over a wide range. I’ve always been very strong, placed a lot of emphasis, on superannuation.<sup>250</sup>

Superannuation<sup>251</sup> was a constant topic of conversation with Askin, who once told a journalist he was ‘a bit of a crank about superannuation’, linking it with the drive for security that ‘governs the working man’s life from schooldays to the grave’. In the same interview he described himself as ‘the average fellow’, and journalist Evan Williams went on to describe him as ‘an immensely genial and highly professional politician’.<sup>252</sup> Press gallery journalist Brian Dale, who later went on to play a key role in shaping the image of Neville Wran, described Askin as ‘one of the most affable politicians you could meet’.<sup>253</sup> Askin, quite clearly, enjoyed meeting people, and his forays into the public bars of hotels and a chat with the locals are legendary.<sup>254</sup> He once told his friend, the

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<sup>248</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1968.

<sup>249</sup> Speech by Askin at Masonic Hall, Kensington, on 3 February 1970 in support of endorsed Liberal candidate for the Randwick by-election, Mr J. R. McLaughlin. Typescript in National Library of Australia.

<sup>250</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1972.

<sup>251</sup> Askin did more than just talk about superannuation. As Premier, he re-opened the New South Wales Public Service Superannuation Fund to permit the entry of several hundred public servants who, for one reason or another, had not qualified or enlisted for superannuation before. (See Geoffrey Reading, *High Climbers: Askin and Others*, Ferguson, Sydney, 1989, p. 53.)

<sup>252</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1968.

<sup>253</sup> Brian Dale, *Ascent to Power: Wran and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>254</sup> See, for example, Reading, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

journalist David McNicoll: ‘I know how to talk to fellers in the pub. A lot of Liberals don’t’.<sup>255</sup> In an obituary notice after Askin’s death in 1981, McNicoll wrote:

In a most important way, it was the secret of his success. He was a ‘knockabout’ man. The workman on the building site, the taxidriver, the lift attendant – they instinctively picked Askin as “fair dinkum”. They liked him and they trusted him.<sup>256</sup>

As Premier, Askin presided over a period of remarkable political stability; his ministers enjoyed longevity of tenure and were on the whole capable; his government delivered efficiently on its promises. It has become fashionable to regard the Askin years as having left little mark on New South Wales,<sup>257</sup> but this is to disregard the modernising impact of the first change of government in the State in a quarter of a century. Askin was keenly aware of the need to prove he was ‘dinkum’, and soon after taking office he acted to address the issue of rising crime rates which he had stressed in his 1965 policy speech. Emphasising the need for greater deterrence, a series of legislative initiatives saw the Crimes Act amended to increase the penalty for armed robbery from 14 years to 20 years imprisonment, and a range of increased fines for lesser assaults.<sup>258</sup> The union-directed restrictions on shopping and trading hours, as was the case in Victoria in 1955, were vexatious and petty, not to mention heavily inconvenient for most people, and Askin acted swiftly to reform them. In each of his election campaigns after coming to power in 1965, Askin could rightly point to considerable achievements, and by the time of the 1971 campaign they stacked up impressively. One major headache — liquor law reform — had been carried out, and it was tribute to Askin’s canny leadership that his government was not damaged in the process despite well-known internal divisions on the issue. As well as liquor law reform, Askin had set in place Australia’s first consumer protection legislation and set up the Corporate Affairs Commission to improve the integrity of corporate governance. Three-year teacher training was introduced, the Sydney Harbour National Park was set up, breath testing for motorists was introduced

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<sup>255</sup> *The Bulletin*, 22 September 1981.

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> See, for example, Gerard Henderson, *Menzies’ Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*, Harper Collins, (rev. ed.) Sydney, 1998, pp 212-3.

<sup>258</sup> Peter N. Grabosky, *Sydney in Ferment: Crime, dissent and official reaction 1788 to 1973*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977 p. 154.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

along with a prescribed blood alcohol limit, planning began for the Cumberland College of Health Sciences, port facilities at Port Botany and Westmead Hospital.<sup>259</sup>

It is seldom remembered that Askin set in train the most wide-ranging reform of the State's public service. Askin appointed Tom Lewis convenor of the Cabinet sub-committee on machinery of government which was effectively devising a blueprint for the first thorough overhaul of the public service in almost 60 years. The results from the review, implemented after Askin had retired, effectively changed the face of the public sector in New South Wales: four departments were abolished, three new ones were created and 22 departments and agencies were to undergo major structural change. The journal *Public Administration* hailed the changes as innovative and progressive, noting: 'The orientation of the machinery of government review has clearly been to the future...It is the beginning of a built-in evolutionary process to keep policy makers and administrators on their toes, and in a fit state to operate the machinery of government'.<sup>260</sup> In other areas, Askin's stewardship saw an increase in police numbers, tougher anti-drug laws, reform of an archaic prison system, a crackdown on pollution, reform of the corrupt Sydney City Council, establishment of a Consumer Affairs Bureau and a significant extension of the national parks system and, most importantly, a generally better deal in financial matters from the Commonwealth.<sup>261</sup>

At another level, and in keeping with Askin's stated determination to push the Liberal Party towards the political centre, he demonstrated both the influence he was able to wield within the party as well as keeping a promise to 'new' Liberal voters he wooed so effectively in 1965 when he moved to bring greater security to lower level government employees. The result of this was a Provident Fund set up for those unable to qualify for

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<sup>259</sup> Don Harwin, 'The 1971 Election', in Hogan & Clune, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>260</sup> Barry Moore, 'Machinery of Government Changes in New South Wales', *Public Administration*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, June 1975, p.126.

<sup>261</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 13 January 1971.

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superannuation as well as extensions to the pensions of children to deceased superannuation pensioners.<sup>262</sup>

Askin trusted his ministers just as they trusted him as leader, and he was by no means averse to new ideas. His Justice Minister, John Maddison, a lawyer and liberal reformer, was in many ways Askin's opposite. Born into a moderately wealthy family on Sydney's North Shore and educated at Sydney Grammar and the University of Sydney, he saw active service in the AIF as a young officer in Borneo and the Philippines. Elected to parliament in 1962, he quickly made his mark and was appointed to the Justice portfolio in Askin's first government which he held for the duration of the coalition's rule, adding that of Attorney-General for the last 16 months. Maddison persuaded Askin of the need for a standing Law Reform Commission, which was duly established, and among its significant successes was a comprehensive reform of the administrative appeals system.<sup>263</sup>

However, with another win to his credit in 1973, and a promise to retire, Askin was starting to lose his lustre, and the *Australian* reported in the middle of 1974 that he was 'very much an unloved and unwanted man within his own Government', and that his trademark 'boots and all' campaigning style was becoming irrelevant.<sup>264</sup> There is some evidence that Askin's judgment was starting to desert him. With the ALP in power federally, Askin weighed in to the 1974 Federal campaign by sponsoring a series of controversial television commercials that dismayed sections of his own party. When the Victorian Liberal, Don Chipp, publicly dissociated himself from one of the advertisements, Askin promptly advised Chipp to 'keep his bib out of NSW'. Tempers were fraying as Askin had already described the Federal Liberal campaign as 'pussyfooting', saying that if he had his way he would be in there 'boots and all'. At the same time, he left Sydney on a seven-week overseas trip, the itinerary for which he

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<sup>262</sup> Dempsey, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>263</sup> Dempsey, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>264</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

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refused to make public. A newspaper cited ‘some influential parliamentary colleagues’ who no longer saw him ‘as the electoral asset to the Liberal-CP cause that he was in the past’.<sup>265</sup> By the end of 1974, as he made way for his successor, a journalist wrote: ‘There’s a feeling that his style is out of date’. It was more than a feeling: a public opinion poll taken earlier that year showed him to be the most unpopular State leader in the land with just 40 per cent of those interviewed regarding him as satisfactory.<sup>266</sup>

A public spat with the press gallery over his reluctance to hold more regular press conferences contrasted starkly with the ever-accessible Neville Wran who had succeeded to the ALP leadership late in 1973. The president of the press gallery complained that since 1965 journalists had been asking Askin for more press conferences with no restrictions on the range of questions, and they remained ‘far from satisfied with the general accessibility of the Premier to the press’.<sup>267</sup> Askin, true to form, issued his usual, one-sentence reply (through his press secretary, of course): ‘They [press representatives] are entitled to their views, which do not correspond with my views’.<sup>268</sup>

Even such a stern critic as Gerard Henderson, however, has conceded that Askin was possessed of formidable political skills,<sup>269</sup> and there is little doubting his political achievements, still unmatched by any Liberal leader in New South Wales. James Jupp has written of the New South Wales Liberals as having ‘a right-wing ratbag character’ that was absent in Victoria; it was this that created an ‘oppositional character’ in the Sydney party that, except under Askin, ‘has created instability in leadership and severe factionalism’.<sup>270</sup> Not only did he represent a sharp departure from Liberal leaders of the past (as well as those to follow), in both style and substance, he was able to win loyalty

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<sup>264</sup> *Australian*, 8 July 1974.

<sup>265</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1974.

<sup>266</sup> *Herald* (Melbourne), 7 December 1974.

<sup>267</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1973

<sup>268</sup> *National Times*, 21-26 May 1973.

<sup>269</sup> Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>270</sup> James Jupp, ‘Political Culture: The “Bourgeois” and “Proletarian” Variations’, in Jim Davidson (ed.), *The Sydney-Melbourne Book*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986. p. 86.

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from his followers as his predecessors had notably failed to do. In an ‘uncomplicated way’ Askin was the complete Keynesian in the way he saw the state in relation to the economy, as he once told the *Sydney Morning Herald* when asked what regrets he had about the things he could not do because of a lack of money.

In the field of social services, for instance. It’s hard to pick out...children, underprivileged people, pensioners, more concessions on transport, all these things for the underprivileged because I’ve got a basic philosophy that the role of government is to narrow the gap between the haves and the have-nots.<sup>271</sup>

The veteran political commentator John O’Hara wrote on the day of Askin’s retirement in 1975 that he had reshaped the political landscape in New South Wales, not least in his own Liberal Party.

Future historians will not find it in the legislative records, but Sir Robert turned the NSW Liberal Party from a sodality of dilettantes into a team of tough professionals that has proved more than a match since 1965 for a Labor Party accustomed to playing politics the hard way.<sup>272</sup>

Askin brought to the Liberals a leadership and a style they had not known before, and would wait a long time before seeing again. His own words, spoken to a newspaper reporter just before he became Premier, provide an eloquent summation of his political career.

What my life shows is that a middle-of-the-road man like myself can force his way up to the top...The system is not bad when that can happen to a fellow like myself. I’m no Tory with a monocle in my eye and a cigar in my mouth, yet I’ve made it in a party which is popularly supposed to be true-blue conservative.<sup>273</sup>

The departure of Askin saw the Liberals rapidly slide into disarray. His successor, Tom Lewis, made many mistakes and was unable to unite the party as Askin had done, and Lewis’s removal in a party room coup a year after he succeeded Askin signalled a degree of desperation. His successor, Sir Eric Willis, lasted a mere three months as Premier

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<sup>271</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1972.

<sup>272</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 January 1975.

<sup>273</sup> *Australian*, 16 February 1965.

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after calling an early election and losing narrowly to a resurgent ALP under Wran in May 1976. The Liberals quickly reverted to their pre-Askin type in electing and rejecting leaders in quick succession, and it was another dozen years before they again tasted electoral success, under Nick Greiner. By this time Askin was seven years dead, and his extended reign as Liberal Premier seemed a very long time ago, just as his remembered political style had passed into legend.

#### 4.8. The Private Askin

**ASKIN** was a very private man, a man who valued his time away from the public gaze; and even more than two decades after his death a certain veil of mystery still surrounds him. This continuing fascination, no doubt, is due entirely to the campaign launched against his reputation by journalist David Hickie whose story in the *National Times* newspaper, headlined ASKIN: FRIEND TO ORGANISED CRIME appeared on the newsstands on the very day of Askin's funeral on 14 December 1981.<sup>274</sup> Hickie subsequently embellished the allegations in a book, *The Prince and the Premier*,<sup>275</sup> quoting unnamed sources as saying Askin and his police commissioners were paid \$100,000 each by criminals to enable illegal gambling to flourish.<sup>276</sup> The book also alleged that Askin 'arranged' for several knighthoods to be conferred for a fee of \$60,000 each.<sup>277</sup> It has had the effect of investing Askin with a potent posthumous infamy.

But even long before then Askin's private life was little known. Indeed, when he came to power in 1965 a Melbourne journalist wrote that 'the files don't have a great deal on R. W. Askin...'<sup>278</sup> Even eight years later, as speculation was mounting over his impending retirement, the face and name were certainly more familiar, but the fleshed-out, private Askin still remained elusive.

Like Nixon he is a public figure devoid of public personality. He provides no fun for the Press or the people; he doesn't swim in polluted rivers or quote sappy poetry or lift up his shirt to show an operation scar. All the world may know what sort of a politician he is: an extremely competent one. What sort of human being he may be is necessarily a matter of speculation.

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<sup>274</sup> For a detailed overview, and a spirited defence of Askin, see Reading, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>275</sup> David Hickie, *The Prince and the Premier*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985.

<sup>276</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>277</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 83-8.

<sup>278</sup> *Sun News-Pictorial*, 14 August 1965.

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One reason for this is that he doesn't have much time for the Press. He will co-operate with one or two proven supporters but he never chases and very often refuses publicity, a trait many could argue is an unusual and admirable trait in a politician.<sup>279</sup>

The same journalist recounted the known facts of Askin's struggling background, his army service, his career in the bank and his modest eight-line entry in *Who's Who*, before observing: 'Little flesh has ever been added to these bones'. Askin well knew the presence and force of rumour and innuendo in political life, and in a frank and revealing interview in his last year as Premier, he discussed such issues as planned campaigns of destabilisation against him, which he said had been used by the ALP against Prime Minister Bill McMahon before him, alluding to stories that he was living apart from his wife, that he spent too much time at the races and that he patronised illegal gambling casinos. If anyone could prove him a liar he would resign from parliament immediately.

Then they said Askin's covering up for the criminal elements in the clubs. So I said we'll have a Royal Commission. I went into the box for two and a half hours, answered every question and the judge found everything disproved. The Government was in no way involved but not one of the people making the allegations and spreading the rumours was prepared to get into that box. It's the false accusations, the insinuation and the innuendo that I get worked up about. But people always listen. You win elections by 3 per cent and if they can persuade 2 per cent you're not everything you're cracked up to be you're liable to lose an election.<sup>280</sup>

The denigration of Askin has so far never been more than unfounded and anonymous accusations. If his death in 1981 removed the threat of libel from the newspapers, one might have expected the sources to come forward and evidence presented. It has not happened.

John Carrick, when general secretary of the Liberal Party and even after when a Senator, was well aware of the rumours and did all he could to investigate them, formally and informally. He found nothing.

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<sup>279</sup> *Bulletin*, 24 November 1973.

<sup>280</sup> *Australian*, 14 May 1974.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

I have met heads of his departments and said is there anything he did that was wrong. No one could ever remember anything! He was not a crook. Not in terms of running the State. I think he may have got a few favours from knighting a few people that I wouldn't have knighted. And that was it. Nothing.<sup>281</sup>

The long-serving Governor of New South Wales, Sir Roden Cutler, a VC winner and a stickler for propriety in both public and private life, was appointed by Askin and served for all but the first year of Askin's decade as Premier. Long after his retirement he was asked if Askin was corrupt, and he replied that he never had 'any inkling' that this was the case. Certainly, he knew Askin liked to bet and that he received some good tips on racehorses and 'made use of them'. But he found Askin to be 'not a generous man in many ways', a man who seldom if ever entertained, and 'would've saved pretty well everything he got'.<sup>282</sup> Tom Lewis, who succeeded Askin as Premier, said the Liberal Party would simply not have supported a leader who was corrupt, and he and his closest colleagues had no doubts about Askin. He said a recurring theme in allegations was that Askin controlled some sort of illegal 'slush fund' that he used for electoral, or even personal, expenses; there was a fund, Lewis confirmed, and it did come from donations that the party organisation was not made aware of, but there was nothing illegal nor did Askin use it for any personal expenditure. It was set up with several trustees, of which Lewis was one, and Sir John Fuller another. Lewis said the allegations disgusted him and after a long and close working and personal relationship with Askin he could vouch for his honesty and integrity.

Who was it who came out and said he was a crook? It was the day we buried him. It's very hard: what can you do? Stand up and say I'm not a crook? I have talked to a number of Queens Counsel and others, nothing's ever been proved to me or to John Fuller...or Charlie Cutler or anyone I know of, that Bob was a crook.<sup>283</sup>

The influential journalist David McNicoll was one of the few members of his profession who was personally close to Askin, and he had this to say about the allegations.

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<sup>281</sup> Carrick interview, 24 May 2002.

<sup>282</sup> Interview with Sir Roden Cutler by Stewart Harris, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, 30 June, 14 September, 1992, Oral TRC 2834, pp. 74-5.

<sup>283</sup> Lewis interview, 2 August 2002.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Askin*

If Askin was accepting bribes he had strange ways of enjoying the fruits. His lifestyle was almost depressingly simple. He never aspired to a more glamorous home than a Manly cottage; he entertained hardly at all.<sup>284</sup>

To those on the Labor side of politics, Askin was admired for his political skills but there was a lingering suspicion that he had been disloyal to his roots and was not entirely to be trusted. A long-serving Labor MP, Kevin Stewart, recalled that Askin, whatever the occasion or the company, never ceased to be the political warrior — a trait that was as much a mark of his personal style as it was his total commitment to politics.

Well, you never shared a confidence with Askin because he'd dud you quick as look at you...If you got under Askin's skin he would have said, 'And I remember what you told me — you came and told me the other day something or other' — you know, like that. So all you did with Askin you just had a happy drink with him and told him a joke or two.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> *Bulletin*, 1 July 1986.

<sup>285</sup> Oral History Interview with the Hon Kevin Stewart by Richard Raxworthy, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection. TRC 3128/1, p. 26.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE LIBERALS AND LEADERSHIP

5.1 Towards a Typology of Leadership in the Liberal Party

5.2 Typical Australians, atypical Liberals?

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

**THE LIBERAL** Party, for all of its success, occupies a curious position within the Australian political spectrum, staking out the ground to the Right of the Labor Party on most issues, while seeking to accommodate (not always successfully) its inheritance of both the liberal and conservative traditions.<sup>1</sup> It is a straddling act that all Liberal leaders must perform to some extent. In a nation that cherishes the notion of egalitarianism as an ideal if not in practice, outright political conservatism has always had limited electoral appeal and reliance on a simple anti-Labor message is seldom sufficient to win government. What the Liberals as a party have never managed to tap is the passion that often infuses the Labor Party, ‘the enthusiasm and loyalty of the Labor rank and file’, and senior Liberals have from time to time publicly lamented this.<sup>2</sup> It was and remains, paradoxically, a political party that displays a peculiar ‘uneasiness about the purposes of parties and party organisation’<sup>3</sup>. It is a curiously passionless organisation (though by no means averse to occasional blood-letting), often uninterested in its own history and inclined to forget — or even worse, deride — its former leaders. It is tolerated rather than loved, and denigrated by its enemies more than it is defended by its supporters. To many Australians, the old Hancock ‘resistance’ tag of ‘Labor proposes and non-Labor opposes’ still has currency. Kemp has eloquently dismissed this simplistic formulation in mounting a case for Liberal pragmatism.

The Liberal Party is the distinctively indigenous expression of values and interests which have had a major role in the building of modern Australia. And as the society changes, these changes are – slowly – expressed within the Liberal Party and in its policy responses to new circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Judith Brett, also, has noted that despite a plethora of internal contradictions, the Liberal Party has attracted electoral support from voters not so much because it represented their interests ‘but because it has accorded with what they believed’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This dilemma has been addressed by, among others, Prime Minister John Howard in a speech to the Melbourne Press Club on 22 November, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the comments of Allen Fairhall in Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 2003, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kemp, ‘The Liberal Party’, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>5</sup> Brett, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

The issue of leadership has been crucial to Liberal success<sup>6</sup>, and this cannot be over-estimated in the case of Menzies.<sup>7</sup> For all the long years of political ascendancy at the Commonwealth level, the political scales were more evenly balanced than the election results might at a glance suggest, and the Liberal political strategist, John Carrick, was well aware that Labor had retained the support of almost half the Australian people in the post-war years ‘despite the weak leadership and demoralised conditions...’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sir Alan Watt, quoted in Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1979, p. 353, that Menzies, while Prime Minister, ‘personally has been responsible for the coalition’s success in every federal election from 1949 until he retired in 1966.

<sup>7</sup> Hancock refers to the Liberal Party strategy of pitting Menzies ‘the statesman’ against Labor’s leaders, Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 229.

*Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

**Table 9. Comparative voting at Federal elections 1949-74 (Primary vote for House of Representatives)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Labor</b>	<b>DLP</b>
	%	%	%	%
1949	39.39	10.87	<b>45.98</b>	
1951	40.62	9.72	<b>47.63</b>	
1954	38.55	8.52	<b>50.03</b>	
1955	39.73	7.90	<b>44.63</b>	5.17*
1958	37.23	9.32	<b>42.81</b>	9.41**
1961	33.58	8.51	<b>47.90</b>	8.71
1963	37.09	8.94	<b>45.47</b>	7.44
1966	<b>40.14</b>	9.84	39.98	7.31
1969	34.77	8.56	<b>46.95</b>	6.02
1972	32.04	9.44	<b>49.59</b>	5.25
1974	34.95	9.96	<b>49.30</b>	1.42***

\*Known as Anti-Communist Labor

\*\* Including the Queensland Labor Party

\*\*\* DLP in Victoria only

*Source: Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964; Colin A. Hughes, A Handbook of Australian Government & Politics 1965-1974.*

**Table 10. Comparative voting for the Legislative Assembly at Victorian State elections 1955-1973**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Labor</b>	<b>DLP</b>
1955	..% <b>37.78</b>	..% 9.53	..% 32.57	..% 12.61*
1958	37.18	9.29	<b>37.69</b>	14.43
1961	36.44	7.14	<b>38.55</b>	16.95
1964	<b>39.63</b>	8.76	36.22	14.97
1967	37.49	8.65	<b>37.90</b>	14.29
1970	36.70	6.39	<b>41.42</b>	13.30
1973	<b>42.34</b>	5.96	41.61	7.79

\* Australian Labor (Anti-Communist)

*Source:* Colin A. Hughes & B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*; Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government & Politics 1965-1974*.

Setting aside the vote of the Country Party, which remained relatively stable, the Liberals on their own outpolled the ALP only once in their 23 year stranglehold in Canberra (see Table 9) — in the 1966 election.<sup>9</sup> In Victoria, where the Liberals were strongest and governed in their own right (see Table 10, above), this happened only twice — in 1955 and 1973,<sup>10</sup> and in New South Wales, in the brief ascendancy there, not at all (see Table 5, p.115). What this tends to suggest is that Labor has always been able to rely on a more solid core vote than the Liberals, and for the Liberals to win or retain government it was necessary to woo some of those who might ordinarily vote Labor. The leadership of Menzies in Canberra was clearly superior to that of the ALP in disarray, while in Victoria Bolte was also able to capitalise on similar weaknesses in his opponents; in both

<sup>9</sup> Colin A. Hughes and B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, pp. 380-421.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 493-496; Colin A. Hughes, *A Handbook of Australian Government & Politics 1965-1974*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1977, pp. 110-2.

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instances the vote of the DLP, which by tradition would have been largely a Labor vote, went their way.

As a national leader, Menzies was able to play on the fears about communism and exploit Labor's internal wrangles to his advantage; in Victoria, Bolte aggressively promoted policies of economic growth and home ownership that appealed to a wide cross section of the electorate, and the stability he brought to government, essentially by his leadership, was seen, rightly, as a source of strength. Many years after his retirement he looked back on this with pride.

If you were to ask me what my greatest achievements were in my years as leader, I would say that I never had any trouble with the parliamentary party. In 20 years I did not have to look over my shoulder once. My leadership sustained me.<sup>11</sup>

Henry Bolte, first and foremost, was a superb manager of people; his governments were characterised by the longevity of his ministerial team and an absence of public disunity. Bolte's plain speaking was as effective in maintaining the unity of his team as it was in presenting his government to the people. His unique appeal, as was Askin's in New South Wales, was that his style and way of life could just as easily have made him a Labor leader as a Liberal leader. If Australians are generally uneasy about class distinctions, the bluff Henry Bolte gave no cause whatever for resentment on this count. Much the same could be said of Askin in New South Wales, never an easy State for the non-Labor cause. He was a man of the people, just as much at ease in the public bar of a corner pub as he was in a corporate boardroom.

#### 5.1 Towards a Typology of Leadership in the Liberal Party

Given the discussion above, it is possible to identify and extrapolate certain broad types who have come to leadership in the Liberal Party, with varying degrees of success. The following categories for leadership outlined below are both broad and elastic; indeed, there is considerable overlap in the qualities depicted and types described. The case of

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Gorton, for example, could just as easily have been examined as one of the *epigoni* instead of outsider. Askin, too, exhibited many of the qualities of outsider in terms of both his social background and occupation in contradistinction both from those who preceded him and also many of the colleagues who elected him. Lewis could easily have been included in the amateur category. Of the 20 leaders included here only five — Snedden, Treatt, Robson, Morton and Norman — did not lead a government.

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<sup>11</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 10 October 1984.

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**Table 11 Leadership Types**

<p><b>Patrician/ Authoritarian</b></p>	<p><b>Bruce</b> (Prime Minister 1923-9) <b>Menzies</b> (Prime Minister 1939-41; 1949-66) <b>Fraser</b> (Prime Minister 1975-83)</p>	<p>Lofty, aloof, strong-type leaders. Often feared by their followers rather than liked. Imperious manner that reassures in uncertain times. Generally impervious to change; inflexible.</p>
<p><b>Yeoman/NCO</b></p>	<p><b>Bolte</b> (Vic. Premier 1955-72) <b>Askin</b> (NSW Premier 1965-75) <b>Brand</b> (WA Premier 1959-71) <b>Playford</b> (SA Premier 1938-65)</p>	<p>Men with a populist streak and with an easy air of command; strong on loyalty. Appeal to non-traditional voters; pragmatic; earthy.</p>
<p><b>Outsider</b></p>	<p><b>Gorton</b> (Prime Minister 1968-71) <b>Snedden</b> (Fed. Opp. Ldr. 1972-75)</p>	<p>An often transitional leader without solid core of support in the party despite long association. Lacking authority; tolerated rather than respected.</p>
<p><b>Insider</b></p>	<p><b>Holt</b> (Prime Minister 1966-7) <b>Hamer</b> (Vic. Premier 1972-81)</p>	<p>In the party and of the party; well connected in networks of influence; power of moral suasion.</p>
<p><b>Epigoni</b></p>	<p><b>McMahon</b> (Prime Minister 1971-2) <b>Lewis</b> (NSW Premier 1975-6) <b>Willis</b> (NSW Premier 1976) <b>Thompson</b> (Vic. Premier 1981-2)</p>	<p>Fated to follow established leaders and a long period of rule as that rule is already disintegrating. Faced by escalating tensions within the party that they cannot control and an electorate that is no longer listening.</p>
<p><b>Loner</b></p>	<p><b>Hollway</b> (Vic. Premier 1947-50; 1952) <b>Treatt</b> (NSW Opp. Ldr. 1946-54)</p>	<p>Determined individualist of the view that the party needs him more than he needs the party; often at odds with party organisation. Does not build bridges within party; gives rise to tensions.</p>
<p><b>Amateur</b></p>	<p><b>Norman</b> (Vic. Opp. Ldr. (1951-2) <b>Robson</b> (NSW Opp. Ldr. 1954-5) <b>Morton</b> (NSW Opp. Ldr. 1955-9)</p>	<p>Often mistaken for the Messiah, but sometimes just a circuit-breaker. Generally found to be lacking political skills and /or commitment.</p>

## Patrician/Authoritarian

### *Bruce*

Stanley Melbourne Bruce, Nationalist Prime Minister from 1923 to 1929, is the only member of this group of leaders not to be a Liberal (in the formal party sense). He is included here for two reasons: he qualifies as head of the major non-Labor party pre-dating the formation of the Liberal Party, and also because he represents a type of leader that has always figured prominently in Liberal thinking. On another level, Bruce also represents a strand of thought that is essentially supra-party; his leadership owed little if anything to party<sup>12</sup> (or what passed for party in the very loose arrangement that was the Nationalists' organisation). He also represents the closest Australian example to the British Conservatives' system of deciding leadership questions for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century —the quasi-mystical 'emergence' of a leader in contradistinction to formal election.<sup>13</sup> So it was that Bruce — a wounded and decorated war hero thrust into politics by chance when asked to make a recruiting speech — came to be Prime Minister, and a most unlikely one at that, according to his biographer.

Almost everything about him should have disqualified him. Many Australians of that day thought of an educated Englishman as one who wore spats, dropped his g's, called people by their surnames without even the handle of a 'Mr', used Wodehousian words like 'feller', and preserved an Olympian aloofness, an unflappable demeanour and a stiff upper lip.

Bruce fitted that Australian image of an Englishman. In addition, he went for horse riding in town, polo and gold and wore the prescribed clothes for them; he also liked large English cars. To most Australians he seemed a 'toff'. He was big, dark and handsome, and impressive: self-deprecatory in a manner that verged on boastfulness. In his polite English way he could be courteously offensive, to many people he seemed aloof; some thought him arrogant.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A party man Bruce was not. When first asked to stand for the seat of Flinders, Bruce maintained for the rest of his life that he was unsure whether he was being asked to stand for a Federal or a Victorian seat. His opening speech of his campaign was even described by one critic as indicating a naïve desire to render politics non-political. In 1938, when moves were afoot to draft Bruce as Prime Minister, he still made reference to the 'National Party' even though it had long ceased to exist, and the United Australia Party had been in existence for almost a decade. (See Cecil Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne: Man of Two Worlds*, Heinemann, London, 1965, pp. 38, 44, 265).

<sup>13</sup> R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties: The Distribution of Power Within the Conservative and Labour Parties*, Heinemann, London, 2nd ed., 1963, p. 54

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To another observer, Bruce's rise owed much to his predictability and his conservatism — vital reassurances to a country riven with divisions, grieving its 60,000 war dead and in the aftermath of the bitter conscription battles which had split the Labor Party asunder. Yet the wounds were not healed, and Bruce's conservatism — as with his leadership — were found wanting: despite his hard work and commitment to good government, he lacked 'both the political flexibility and the understanding of ordinary Australians to provide either unifying or inspiring leadership'.<sup>15</sup> Bruce was not naturally gregarious and lacked the facility to share his burden; he was to say, revealingly, after his defeat: 'The job was a lonely one; so few you can trust and absolutely confide in'.<sup>16</sup> Bruce was very unbending. A note attached to his brief biography and distributed to the press read: 'Mr Bruce would be very glad if the newspapers would not refer to him by his Christian name as Mr Stanley Bruce, but always as Mr S. M. Bruce'.<sup>17</sup> No one called him Stan, or even Stanley. As Brett has noted, Bruce's perception of strikes as the work of an alien few was the result of 'his inability to admit to the existence of genuine differences of interest within Australian society, as well as his own remoteness from ordinary Australians' experiences'.

The limitations of Bruce's social experience here were starkly apparent. Bruce was a stolidly unimaginative, wealthy man who inhabited an extraordinarily narrow and privileged social world...Out of Australia during his youth and early adulthood, serving in the British not the Australian army, he had few old friends and associations to give him access to other experiences. When he was urging Australians to tighten their belts, he built himself a sixteen-room Spanish mansion in Frankston, and he regarded Labor's criticisms as an impertinent intrusion into his private affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Bruce was indeed a strange bird in egalitarian Australia, a man seemingly out place in both time and temperament. Yet he was by no means devoid of leadership qualities. A critical observer such as Eggleston, who knew him personally, wrote that he 'evidently had the gift of leadership...but his qualification was not obvious'.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Brett, 'Stanley Melbourne Bruce', in Michelle Grattan (ed.) *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland, Sydney, 2000, p. 128.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce to E. A. Willis, quoted in I. M. Cumpston, *Lord Bruce of Melbourne*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1989, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Brett, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-5.

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He was aloof, had no popular appeal, introduced no original political measures, followed the boom and made great mistakes. But he was unquestioned master of his party and disciplined recalcitrant members without suffering in his own prestige, a thing rarely found possible in Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Bruce represents a genuine curiosity in the Australian political firmament. He was, though of Australian birth, essentially English in manner, association and identification at a time when nascent Australian nationalism, for what it was, was struggling with its own contradictions.<sup>20</sup> Australian conservatism, too, attached as it was to the Imperial ideal, was uncertain of its bearings — a situation well demonstrated in the fact that of the first seven non-Labor Prime Ministers, three came from the ranks of Labor (Cook, Hughes, Lyons). When you take out the three Federation figures (Barton, Deakin, Reid) who first attained office before Labor was a genuine national power politically, two features are immediately suggested: Australian conservatism was remarkably syncretic and non-ideological, and it was finding difficulty in providing political leadership. Up against a well-established and organised Labor Party, albeit weakened by the conscription split, Bruce was the first leader it had produced, and he was not by any account a distinctively Australian example.<sup>21</sup> As an Australian voice it faltered both in its articulation and its accent.

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<sup>19</sup> F. W. Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1953, p. 12. Bruce as ‘unquestioned master’ is a most dubious assertion. He lost Watt from the party and failed to secure support from Groom, which eventually led to his defeat.

<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the Great War and the burgeoning Anzac legend, Australia’s sense of itself as a nation led to an incipient conflict with the Imperial connection, or, as one commentator put it ‘an element of gathering but inarticulate tension in the relationship’. (John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, Longman, Harlow, 1988, p. 141). On another less abstract level, there was a clash between the labour tradition and the diggers, most clearly manifesting itself in the policy of preference for employment for ex-servicemen which cut right across the labour movement’s policy of preference for unionists. (See, for example, Ian Turner, ‘1914-19’, in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, p. 354).

<sup>21</sup> Born in Melbourne in 1883, the youngest of four sons and a daughter of an English father who had come to Australia in 1858 and set up business, Bruce was educated at Melbourne Grammar where he was captain of a number of sporting teams and then at Cambridge where he read law and won a Blue for rowing. He began practice at the bar in London and then became chairman of the board of his family’s firm, by that time one of Australia’s largest importers. He returned briefly to Australia in 1911, and at the outbreak of war joined not an Australian unit but the Inns of Court Regiment. He served at Gallipoli where he won the Military Cross and a French decoration. (Colin A. Hughes, *Australian Prime Ministers 1901-1972*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1976, p. 67).

## *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

### *Menzies*

More has been written about Menzies than any other Liberal leader, and that is unlikely to change. Menzies was identified with the Liberal Party more than any other figure given his role in its founding and rise to power within it. As a leader, Menzies tasted both bitter failure and heady success. In his first incarnation as leader (1939-41) he inherited a fractious political structure as well as a war; he was savagely undermined from within by his enemies, and brought down — a clear failure of leadership. In his second incarnation, he had the benefit of a vehicle constructed to his own specifications and remained in the driver's seat, unchallenged, for 22 years — 16 of them as Prime Minister. Clearly, he was able to rally his own forces behind him and smooth over divisions; he managed to keep in check his coalition partner, the Country Party; he was also able to persuade much of the electorate to support him, winning a record seven elections. Yet a sense of uneasiness pervades the question of Menzies as leader; he could be brutal, insensitive, hurtful; he had little capacity for empathising with men he considered to be of lesser stature. The very dominance of the man could be stultifying, as Dame Enid Lyons wrote.

The aura with which he was surrounded, an aura of personal dominance, of assured success suggested even by his physique, had an inhibiting – sometimes even an intimidating – effect on most people. It was unintentional, perhaps unconscious, but I have seen a senior Cabinet Minister colour like a schoolboy when Menzies, in reaction to a view he had expressed, merely raised his brows, and with an effect of concentrated astonishment moved his wide-eyed gaze from face to face around the circle of his hearers. I always felt that it was his misfortune as a Leader that he was unable to temper a little of his own brilliance and strength of personality. Younger men approached him with diffidence, and few who worked with him were able, as I saw it, to reach their full stature.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dame Enid Lyons, *Among the Carrion Crows*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1972, p. 51.

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The Liberal Party's leadership problems after Menzies are a direct result, and his inability to provide adequate succession must rank as a failure,<sup>23</sup> however otherwise glorious was his career. He exhibited a marked aversion to selecting younger men for promotion, and one of his ministers later wrote that he 'seemed to think that a man or woman must be middle-aged before assuming office'.<sup>24</sup> Menzies, of course, had no such wait: he was a Minister in the Victorian Government at 34.

Menzies may have overstayed his time at the helm. The rejuvenation of the coalition's political fortunes at the 1963 election would have been a fitting departure, especially as the Labor Party was still in a state of disarray. By the mid-1960s, Menzies was simply a man of another era: the accolade of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports which he accepted, with its entitlement to an antique uniform and a stake in a castle built by Henry VIII, was to many, especially younger, Australians, faintly absurd. It did nothing to commend the party he had founded to those of an outlook more in keeping with the times.

But just as he had articulated the fears of an uncertain middle class with his 'Forgotten People' address in the 1940s, so, too, was Menzies able to project himself into the everyday life of the nation. Historian Janet McCalman has written how Menzies 'made Australians feel good about themselves'.

Above all he understood his true constituency: he penetrated and comprehended the soul of the middle class in a way no other Australian politician has then or since, and he reshaped conservative politics in this country so that it was perfectly adapted to the

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<sup>23</sup> Howard Beale, *This Inch of Time: Memoirs of Politics and Diplomacy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1977, p. 105. Beale, who served under Menzies and had ample opportunity to observe him closely wrote: 'Because Menzies was not a man to wear his heart on his sleeve, it was not always easy to discern his true feelings, but he did often seem to lack sympathy, and the ability or inclination to project himself into the minds of others, and thus to understand and feel with them...It was also disappointing that Menzies did not "relate" more closely with individual party members – invite them into his room in private and discuss their problems and the problems of government with them. There were many good young men in the Liberal party in those days, experienced but anxious to learn, who would have clearly welcomed his guidance and advice and his friendly criticism when they made mistakes. But for the most part he could not or would not do this, and members were left to learn in their own way or from advice from other colleagues, uncomfortably conscious of his critical appraisal in the background. I think that if he had been able to undertake this task of advising and correcting and bringing likely men forward some of the troubles which overtook the Liberals after Harold Holt's death might have been avoided'.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Downer, *Six Prime Ministers*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1982, p. 26.

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aspirations and ideals of post-war suburbia. He is remembered with deep feeling rather than with approval or gratitude for actual policies he implemented. It was not what he *did* that lives in the memory but what he *was*.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Fraser*

Oxford-educated John Malcolm Fraser, from impeccable Western District grazier stock, spent more than a decade on the backbench under Menzies, unrecognised and increasingly despondent. His election in 1955, when he wrested the Victorian seat of Wannon seat from Labor, saw him enter parliament ‘under very favourable auspices’. He was, according to Hasluck’s critical eye, ‘better qualified academically than any in his age group in the Liberal Party in Canberra’. Yet he was a shy man

unable to find close rapport with the less serious and less thrusting men who did not pretend to have anything more than common sense and a knowledge of the way the average Australian bloke thought and acted.<sup>26</sup>

Fraser never courted popularity, and was passed over for promotion to the ministry when men of considerably lesser talent, such as Snedden and Howson, also elected in 1955, were preferred by Menzies. He first became a Minister under Holt and worked to have Gorton elected after Holt’s death; Gorton promoted him to Cabinet but he subsequently fell out with Gorton, accused him of disloyalty and resigned, setting in train a series of events that led to Gorton’s downfall. It displayed, Hasluck wrote later, ‘some political immaturity — an inability to make allowances and to give as well as to take’.

In a crisis he took refuge on a lofty pinnacle of principle and thought that anyone who was not on a similar pinnacle had no principles of any kind. Fraser always had a kind of feminine pettishness. Why couldn’t other people think as he did? Why did they have to be so mean and so lacking in understanding?<sup>27</sup>

Fraser worked hard himself and drove others to work hard, yet he was cool, detached and impersonal with those around him, too often shunning ‘the intimate human dialogue that

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<sup>25</sup> Janet McCalman, *Journeyings: The Biography of a Middle-Class Generation 1920-1990*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1993, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text, Melbourne, 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

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creates personal understanding'.<sup>28</sup> His style was seen by many as bullying,<sup>29</sup> and to many of his ministers there was a perception that he did not trust their judgement by allowing them independence; a consequence of this was that they were disinclined to act independently or show initiative.<sup>30</sup> And while many political colleagues respected him, and were even in awe of him, they did not like him nor, once he had departed the scene, were they prepared to 'show any vestiges of loyalty to Fraser or his memory'.<sup>31</sup> In the memorable words attributed to Fred Chaney and delivered to Fraser personally: 'You confuse leadership with command'.<sup>32</sup>

#### Yeoman/NCO

##### *Bolte, Askin, Playford, Brand*

These four leaders (see chapters 1, 3 and 4) are the standout figures in the leadership matrix. When seen in this context, their contrast with those who came before (and to some extent after) them is striking. In both style and substance, they embodied the aspirations of those men and women who responded to the crisis of liberalism in the 1940s and set about building a new party that would cross the divides of pre-war Australia. Their ready identification with the *mores* of average Australians challenged the prevailing notion of class-based politics which, insofar as the Liberal Party is concerned, was characterised as late as 1997 by one writer as being regarded (admittedly in a crude over-simplification) 'as the party of the bosses/the Establishment/the upper class...'<sup>33</sup> Bolte and Askin in particular were living refutations of the caricature; their apparent classlessness transcended traditional political allegiances. From the recent war years each of the four displayed a pragmatic, 'can-do' approach to political leadership

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Kelly, 'John Malcolm Fraser' in Grattan, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Weller, *Malcolm Fraser PM*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989 p. 401

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 400.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Craig McGregor, *Class in Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1997, p. 81.

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that resonated in an electorate hungry for a better life. This stood them in sharp contrast to much of the Labor Party of the 1950s which, as Arthur Calwell has lamented, failed to adapt to change and continued to peddle the rhetoric of class (see page 109). The rise of the atypical Liberal was a hallmark of the Liberal ascendancy.

#### Outsider

##### *Gorton*

If the Liberal Party was politically wrong-footed by the not unexpected retirement of Sir Robert Menzies in 1966, it was devastated by the sudden death of Harold Holt at the end of 1967. The party that Menzies and others had so carefully built and led to an unprecedented political ascendancy was suddenly looking tired and vulnerable, especially when being assailed by a wily and articulate ALP leader in Whitlam who had dramatically reshaped his own party. The decision by a group of Liberals to push the claims of the unpredictable Senator John Gorton gained traction in a party that was curiously depleted of talent after so long in office; a key factor in their campaign was the looming shadow of Whitlam, and they were seeking someone who could deal effectively with him,<sup>34</sup> and restore, somehow, anyhow, the Liberals' flagging fortunes. Gorton was an unorthodox choice; he was, as a biographer has pointed out, relatively inexperienced at the time of his elevation, never having held one of the key portfolios — Treasury, External Affairs, Trade or Defence.<sup>35</sup> His career thus far had been unexceptional. Elected in 1949, he had waited nine years for promotion to the Ministry, where 'he filled minor portfolios adequately. He kept out of trouble'.<sup>36</sup> By the time of his surprise election to the prime ministership, the Liberal Party was looking old, grey and dowdy; Whitlam's perceived dynamism served merely to accentuate this. What Gorton did was to provide brief respite, a touch of the novelty. He was, in a sense, an authentically Australian character; relaxed, informal and unpretentious. His battered face was the

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<sup>34</sup> Alan Reid, *The Power Struggle*, Tartan, Sydney, 1969, p. 13. See also Kemp, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Hancock, 'Sir John Grey Gorton', in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers, op. cit.*, p. 307.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

result of a wartime crash as a fighter pilot, giving him the type of hero status that JFK's image makers had worked so hard at in the United States.

While Gorton's larrikin image gave him some sort of superficial public appeal in the early months of his prime ministership, there arose almost immediately a legion of doubters in the Cabinet, on the backbench, in the party organisation, among Liberal State premiers, the public service and in the media. Gorton's inclination to centralism did not sit well in a party dedicated to federalism, and the long mutual antipathy he had with prominent figures like Bolte ensured that there would be conflict. In Bolte's words Gorton had one way of doing things: 'he rode roughshod over everyone'.<sup>37</sup> His brutal removal of John Bunting as permanent head of the Prime Minister's Department engendered a degree of hostility from the public service, and effectively removed Bunting from his inner circle and immediate access to Bunting's extensive corporate knowledge of government. Bunting, observed a former colleague of Gorton's, was 'a master at operating this delicate system'.<sup>38</sup> It was one thing to antagonise the public service, but another to do it publicly. As Alan Reid wrote: 'When he overrode public service recommendations, he made public the fact that he had overridden them'.<sup>39</sup>

Within six months of his assumption of office, the doubts began to emerge in the press. A commentary in a Sydney afternoon newspaper said that many Liberals were 'gravely disturbed' about Gorton's leadership,<sup>40</sup> while a report on Gorton's recent trip to Asia was scathing.

Mr Gorton had produced so bewildering a variety of inconsistencies, facts, opinions and platitudes and rationalisations that almost nothing he said on his return could be surprising.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/14.

<sup>38</sup> Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Reid, *The Gorton Experiment*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney, 1971, p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Sun*, 13 June 1968.

<sup>41</sup> *Nation*, 6 July 1968.

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By the end of 1968, doubts about Gorton had become common currency among political commentators. The Liberal Party, too, was feeling the pressure as donations from the business community declined in response to Gorton's perceived unorthodoxy.<sup>42</sup> The journalist Maximilian Walsh assailed not only Gorton's erratic approach to the job but also his penchant for good living and late nights and his increasing reliance for decision making on a small group within Cabinet, known as the 'kitchen cabinet'. He wrote that the business community was worried about Gorton's 'near irresponsible use of power' as it 'prizes consistency and responsibility among all other virtues'.

Mr Gorton's new directions in a remarkably short time managed to upset many people in and close to the Liberal Party...His performance has created considerable tension within the party. His individualistic approach to each policy question, his near contempt for Party consensus, means that Mr Gorton's progress will be a stormy one.<sup>43</sup>

After losing ground at the 1969 election, further criticism of Gorton's private life<sup>44</sup> was undermining his leadership daily; in March 1971 he was replaced by McMahon after a party room vote.

#### *Snedden*

The long years of the post-war Liberal ascendancy saw the dominance of a party unaccustomed to defeat and entirely unfamiliar with what Menzies once described as 'the art of opposition'.<sup>45</sup> The post-Menzies era came to an inglorious end in 1972 with the election of the first Commonwealth Labor Government in 23 years, the Liberals opting to replace the Prime Minister who lost the election, William McMahon, with the former Treasurer and deputy leader, Billy Snedden. Snedden, a moderately performing Minister at best,<sup>46</sup> was characterised by his relative youth (he was 45 when elected leader) and his

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<sup>42</sup> Neil Brown, *On the Other Hand: Sketches and Reflections from Political Life*, Poplar Press, Canberra, 1993, p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> *Quadrant*, November/December 1968.

<sup>44</sup> See Reid, *The Gorton Experiment*, *op. cit.* pp. 217-41; Edward St John, *A Time to Speak*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1969, *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, Cassell, North Melbourne, 1970, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Hasluck's admittedly tendentious account of Snedden as Attorney-General. (Paul Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 211).

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decidedly atypical Liberal background, the son of a Scottish immigrant stonemason.<sup>47</sup> He won by a single vote over the eminent lawyer and former Foreign Minister, Nigel Bowen. The narrowness of the margin signalled danger;<sup>48</sup> the Liberals were unsure about how they wanted to project themselves in the unfamiliar role of opposition. The then general secretary of the party in New South Wales, Jim Carlton, was scathing in his criticism — a criticism that suggests there was an air of unreality about even the idea of electoral defeat.

It is surprising how much it affected them and how much they did not realise what the changes would be like. A lot of them wandered around like headless chooks for a long time, not having departmental heads to call on, and people to arrange their itineraries...<sup>49</sup>

This was the dazed party that chose Snedden. Interestingly, though not convincingly, Snedden saw his victory as a victory for ‘liberals’ over ‘conservatives’,<sup>50</sup> and when Phillip Lynch was elected his deputy, Snedden was later to write that both had come ‘from a low socio-economic area, though I came from a much lower one than Phil’.<sup>51</sup> It was by no means an easy task to lead a party so accustomed to being in government and, at the same time, looking for scapegoats to blame for defeat. Indeed, so acrimonious was the prevailing climate of opinion within the party that the Federal president, Robert Southey, at the first Federal Executive meeting after the election, spoke of ‘personal ambitions and feuds’ inside the parliamentary party that, since the death of Holt, had been ‘deadly and destructive’. He took the unprecedented step of issuing a warning to the effect that ‘the organisation’s authority over the endorsement [of candidates] may have to be employed ruthlessly’.<sup>52</sup> As a former staffer of Snedden’s was to recount, the first priority in that initial period was appeasement — ‘holding the show together’.<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> Billy Mackie Snedden and M. Bernie Schedvin, *Billy Snedden: An Unlikely Liberal*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Gerard Henderson has remarked on how this shaped Snedden’s approach to the leadership. Rather than pacing himself over three years and waiting for the Whitlam Government’s popularity to wane, Snedden, in Henderson’s view, felt the need to shine immediately. (See Gerard Henderson, *Menzies’ Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, (rev. ed.) 1994, p. 222).

<sup>49</sup> *Canberra Times*, 23 May 1973.

<sup>50</sup> Snedden & Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 145.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Geoff Allen, ‘The Politicians’, in Aitchison (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

holding operation, for what it was, came at a cost: a reputation for positive and strong leadership.

Mr Snedden perceives his role as leader almost wholly in terms of keeping the party together...His concept of how he should go about this role revolves on somehow trying to be all things to all points of view. It means in effect leaderless leadership, for it calls on him to be the appeaser to everyone in an effort to present a facade of Liberal unity. The result is that he emerges as a man with no firm views who allows himself to be led by the nose...<sup>54</sup>

There were also personal tensions, as Snedden was later to reveal about his uneasiness in dealing not only with the Country Party leaders such as Anthony, Nixon and Sinclair, but also the grazier-Liberals such as Street. It was a milieu from which Snedden felt himself excluded, socially as well as politically.<sup>55</sup> It was, he later described it, a ‘micro-class’ who were ‘all friends, mixed socially’.<sup>56</sup>

Snedden was simply not taken seriously by many in his own party. It was an attitude that somehow filtered through to the electorate at large. The former Liberal Premier of South Australia, Steele Hall, became a Senator at the 1974 election for his breakaway Liberal Movement, and branded Snedden a ‘lightweight’, which found its way into the press.<sup>57</sup> Sir Henry Bolte, by then retired, was active in moves to have Snedden replaced after the 1974 election defeat. Bolte, in an interview, was characteristically blunt about Snedden: ‘He’d had one run and was defeated. He should have won, any other real leader would have won in that mid-term election’.

I liked him but he was useless as a leader. And the Libs are ruthless and so we should be. If we’ve got a loser we should get rid of him and Billy Snedden was a loser...Snedden...didn’t understand the rules. For example, here you’ve got a government where this country’s getting on the skids, and all you do as the Leader of the

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<sup>54</sup> *The Australian*, 8 June 1973.

<sup>55</sup> Snedden’s biographer, Schedvin, wrote of those in the Liberal Party with ‘little enthusiasm for someone so clearly not of their kind: he had not attended the right schools, was “under-educated” (despite a university degree), did not belong to the right clubs, had an inappropriate “background” and was much less sensitive to Establishment cues and nuances than he needed to be. He failed to recognise the power and entrenched interests of the upper echelons of Australian society’ (*ibid.*, p. 254).

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>57</sup> Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-50.

## *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

Opposition, you come out with policy that becomes as unpopular as the government's performance. It was ludicrous.<sup>58</sup>

Liberal MP Tony Staley, who organised Fraser's challenge, later said that the problem with Snedden's leadership was that he 'lacked authority'.<sup>59</sup> What Snedden lacked was gravitas. Without this he was unable to influence the party in such a way as to position himself as its embodiment; in this sense, he remained, curiously, an outsider even while he was leader.<sup>60</sup> He failed to understand the complexities of leadership,<sup>61</sup> especially in the sense of forging coalitions<sup>62</sup> and balancing competing interests.<sup>63</sup> His own vapid explanation of why he lost the leadership is damning evidence of his failure. When confronted with a delegation requesting that he stand down in favour of Fraser, Snedden responded: 'I haven't had in some of you fellas for enough grogs'. The man who led that delegation, Tony Staley, reflected on that remark.

It was so typical and so cynical – so cynical, an approach on what it is that people are looking for in political leadership. And it was a tragic comment on Bill himself and his view that it was just 'having the fellas around for a few grogs' and you're sure of your leadership. It was monumentally abysmal from a leader.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/17-8.

<sup>59</sup> Henderson, *op.cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>60</sup> Snedden failed to establish a viable working relationship with the Federal President of the party, Robert Southey. He was later to vent his spleen, quite unreasonably, on Southey, who was widely respected. Snedden wrote: 'I did everything I could to get on with Bob Southey but he was no a natural companion for me. He is an ersatz Englishman – an artificial person with his accent and his ways and his manner. He thought I was of the lower classes, whereas he was of the higher classes. We were totally different people'. (Snedden & Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 174).

<sup>61</sup> Snedden as leader lacked in any real measure both legitimacy and consent. He was unable to ever achieve the status of leadership under which 'followers follow without asking what the cost will be; and only because they believe it is the right thing for them to do; they see it not as a matter of expediency but of principle or conscience. Such loyalty is not given to everyone...' (F. G. Bailey, *Treasons, Stratagems and Spoils: How Leaders Make Practical Use of Values and Beliefs*, Westview, Boulder, 2001, p. 46).

<sup>62</sup> An example of this was his cavalier treatment of the DLP whose support, while waning, was necessary, especially in Victoria. See Frank McManus, *The Tumult & the Shouting*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977, pp.120-1. See also B. A. Santamaria, *Santamaria: A Memoir*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1997, p. 235. Against all evidence, Snedden himself believed that the DLP was no longer relevant, unlike some in his party. He said: 'I had a different view, believing that if the DLP ceased to exist it would not disadvantage us because we would get the votes anyway'. (Snedden & Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 157).

<sup>63</sup> An example was his arbitrary sacking of Gorton and McMahon from his front bench, along with respected party elder Kenneth Anderson. He was later to regret this.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Ayres, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

## *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

### Insider

#### *Holt*

Like any organisation, the Liberal Party looks favourably on its own. Successful transitions from long established leaders have been few. In the two cases studied here, the succession was both well planned and predictable; the successors to both Robert Menzies at the Federal level and Henry Bolte in Victoria were very much Liberal insiders, socially as well as politically. In each case, also, there was no question of the Liberal ascendancy faltering; the political inheritance thus transmitted was in no sense either diminished or diminishing. There was broad (and reassuring) policy continuity in that each successor had served in the Cabinet at a senior level, but neither was in any way a political clone of their former master. What was signalled in each case was a difference in style and a shift in emphasis. Within this framework, however, each was an unquestionably safe choice in terms of the Liberal Party and its perceived interests; they were essentially known quantities.

It was no surprise to anyone when Harold Holt was elected unopposed to succeed Menzies in January 1966; he had long been regarded as the ‘crown prince’.<sup>65</sup> His status in the party was well established having been deputy leader for ten years and Treasurer under Menzies since 1958. He had been by the time he became leader a Member of Parliament for 31 years, representing the blue-ribbon Melbourne electorates of Fawkner (till 1949) and after that, Higgins. Like Menzies before him, Holt was not born to the purple; his father had been a schoolteacher in Sydney, later a hotelier and after that a travelling theatrical manager. Because of his profession, Holt senior sent Harold and his brother to board at Wesley, the old school of Menzies, in Melbourne, from whence he proceeded to Melbourne University and read law, later augmenting his legal earnings as secretary of the Cinematographic Exhibitors’ Association.<sup>66</sup> His professional, business

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<sup>65</sup> Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Hancock, ‘Harold Edward Holt’ in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Australian Prime Ministers*, pp. 272-3.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

and social contacts in Melbourne ensured that he was at the centre of Establishment life in that city; he had joined the Young Nationalists, took a keen interest in social questions and was active in debating. The young Holt cut an attractive figure; the qualities that were to help position him as an insider were already apparent in his role as ‘a debonair bachelor, much talked of and liked, fond of social life, easy in conversation, attractive to women’.<sup>67</sup> After one unsuccessful run for election, he was endorsed for the safe seat of Fawcner in 1935 when the incumbent died. In just under four years he had become, under Menzies, Minister without Portfolio, but was demoted when the Country Party rejoined the coalition. He joined the AIF as a gunner, but after Menzies won the 1940 election he secured Holt’s release from the services and promoted him to Cabinet as Minister for Labour.<sup>68</sup> When Menzies returned to office in 1949, Holt was in his Cabinet, and oversaw the massive post-war immigration program as both Minister for Immigration and Minister for Labour; in 1958 he became Treasurer. His election to the deputy leadership in 1956 saw him cement his place in the Liberal hierarchy; of all the men in the Menzies team, Holt was the most approachable, the most affable. One former Cabinet colleague recalled how he had gone out of his way to encourage younger MPs.<sup>69</sup> Another, the acerbic Hasluck, while regarding Holt’s talents as largely superficial, conceded that as Leader of the House, Holt ‘got on better terms with the opposition, managed the business more tactfully and with less fuss, and himself showed more adroitness and skill on the floor of the House’ than had Harrison, his predecessor.<sup>70</sup> By the time that speculation had arisen about a successor to Menzies, Hasluck wrote that there had been ‘a considerable lack of confidence’ in Holt.<sup>71</sup>

Holt as Prime Minister had a style that was very different from Menzies;<sup>72</sup> he also had some very different views on leadership.

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<sup>67</sup> Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>69</sup> Downer, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>70</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 130-1.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

There is the type of leadership which is so far out in front of the team that there is a danger of lack of co-operation, lack of warmth and some loss of effectiveness. There is the leadership which can lead but, at the same time, be close enough to the team to be part of it and be on the basis of friendly co-operation. I will make that my technique...<sup>73</sup>

Holt's appeal was immense, bringing a freshness to political life in Australia, but the effect was both ephemeral and superficial. While he was able to win a significant election victory in 1966 with a then record majority, fought largely on the Cold War issue of Australia's policy of forward defence and commitment to the US Cause in Vietnam, Holt's inability to see beyond the confines of the Menzies years accurately reflected, as befits a Liberal insider, the Liberal Party's own sclerotic tendency to be oblivious of the rapidly changing social environment. When Holt drowned on 17 December 1967, the turmoil the turmoil that was to engulf the Liberal Party was already in existence.

#### *Hamer*

Rupert ('Dick') Hamer had not always been Henry Bolte's first choice to succeed him; that had been his long-serving and ultra-loyal deputy, Sir Arthur Rylah.<sup>74</sup> Rylah was reluctant and, as it was, illness forced his retirement ahead of Bolte. Bolte was adamant that he did not want to be 'a liability' to the Liberal Party;<sup>75</sup> the man he arranged to succeed him,<sup>76</sup> Hamer, had been in the Legislative Council since 1958, a Minister since 1962, and when Rylah vacated his seat of Kew in 1971, Hamer succeeded him. A solicitor and partner in the family law firm, Hamer had attended Melbourne and Geelong Grammar and Melbourne University. He served as a major in the AIF and saw action at El Alamein, Tobruk, New Guinea and Normandy, and helped plan the Rhine Crossing. He joined the Liberal Party in 1947, and before entering parliament was a member of the State Executive. He was Liberal Establishment through and through; in many ways, in

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<sup>72</sup> Quite apart from his informal image and carefree lifestyle, Holt also differed on his views of the role of the Prime Minister *vis-à-vis* Cabinet. He envisaged a more presidential role than that of first among equals. (See P. G. Tiver, *The Liberal Party: Principles and Performance*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1978, p. 233.)

<sup>73</sup> *Age*, 21 January 1966.

<sup>74</sup> Tom Prior, *Bolte by Bolte*, Craftsman, Melbourne, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>76</sup> Bolte was never coy about the role he played in choosing a successor. In one interview he candidly admitted: 'Yeah...I set him up...' (*Bulletin*, 7 November 1978).

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

both style and substance, he was different from Bolte, as Bolte himself was to acknowledge.

I believed in Dick Hamer; otherwise I wouldn't have retired. We're entirely different and I can quite appreciate the change in style. He always placed great emphasis on things that were somehow minor to me. I was a great believer in development in a material sense, whereas Dick Hamer put more emphasis on what they call the quality of life...<sup>77</sup>

Bolte said he gave careful consideration to the succession, and came to the view after looking at the whole party that Hamer 'was the most obvious one to select'. He says he counselled Hamer not to 'try to follow me as such' and to establish an image of his own.<sup>78</sup> That Hamer tried to do, and was at the forefront in seeking to expand the Liberals' electoral base in Victoria,<sup>79</sup> thereby bringing himself into conflict with the conservative wing of the party and also the business community.<sup>80</sup> In line with the upheavals that occurred within the wider party after the 1972 Federal election loss, the seas on which Hamer found himself sailing were considerably rougher than those of the later Bolte years, and his authority would be undermined in the process. As the Victorian Liberals experienced what Alan Missen has called 'a strange divergence between...approaching Federal defeat and a refreshing revival of ideas and vigorous new leadership on a State level', Hamer was clearly on the side of the progressive forces.

From his commencement of office, Dick Hamer made it clear that it was a new administration with a major change in policy initiatives. The emphasis was henceforth to be on individual and community welfare (not just economic growth), on quality of life, conservation and other new areas of demand. This was also reflected in parliamentary announcements of new legislation. It was also noticeable in the selection of young, progressively minded, new candidates for a number of seats.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Bulletin*, 7 November 1978.

<sup>78</sup> Bolte interview, 1:2/38.

<sup>79</sup> Alan Missen makes it clear that Hamer was active in seeking to recruit new blood to the parliamentary party. (See Missen's epilogue in Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power & Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria*, James Bennett, Melbourne, 1974, p. 195).

<sup>80</sup> Bolte said in 1976: 'There's a feeling abroad amongst the businessmen of Melbourne that Dick is not pulling his weight...' By this, he meant that Hamer was not following Bolte-style pro-business policies. (Bolte interview, 1:2/39).

<sup>81</sup> Epilogue in Aimer, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

Of his own views, Hamer agreed that they were best summed up by the designation, ‘small-l Liberal’.

Yes. I would be proud of that description. I hope it's accurate. I don't regard myself as a reactionary type of Liberal. I think I am what I regard as a conservative in the best sense, that is, you build on what you have moved to already and you try to assess what is good in the past and keep it and change what isn't good.<sup>82</sup>

### Epigoni

A crumbling political edifice is a strange thing that generates its own anti-logic; it often builds up a momentum of self-destruction as leaders abdicate, either voluntarily or otherwise; those inside glimpse mortality and make hasty decisions, often quite reckless ones, in their collective clutching at straws; caution is frequently thrown to the wind, along with common sense and judgement. The men, or women, left in command at the time of final collapse are, more often than not, poor and wretched supplicants of St Jude; their lot is to have been called to lead at a time of retreat, to preside over the act of political capitulation. Their fate is to figure in history merely as footnotes to an era that preceded them; their muted glory is but the pale and fading ember of a dying fire. The sleep of reason breeds unlikely leaders. They are the *epigoni*, the after born.

### *McMahon*

William McMahon's elevation had more than a touch of desperation about it, a strong and fatal reaction to Gorton's unsettling unorthodoxy. It was surely a case of the Liberals acting *in extremis*. McMahon was liked by few of his colleagues and trusted by even fewer; it was altogether remarkable that this opportunistic survivor from the class of '49 could rise to the top. The end was surely nigh. Hasluck has written frankly of his dislike for McMahon, noting that the ‘longer one is associated with him the deeper the contempt for him grows...’ He was, to Hasluck, ‘disloyal, devious, dishonest,

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<sup>82</sup> *Bulletin*, 31 January 1976.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

untrustworthy, petty, cowardly...<sup>83</sup> McMahon always had a degree of support from New South Wales<sup>84</sup> and, despite Menzies having had him in his ministry from 1951, Menzies had a habit of referring to him in private as ‘that little bastard McMahon’.<sup>85</sup> It was surely a sign that the Liberal Party of Menzies had exhausted itself when McMahon emerged as leader, as the last man standing. This was a view held by even some within the parliamentary party, such as Neil Brown.

It is amazing to me that McMahon ever became Prime Minister. He was devoid of the most elementary qualities that the job requires. He had no judgment, no sense of occasion or timing and not the slightest understanding of the mood of the people or their needs. If it can be measured in weight, he had not an ounce of that indefinable quality of leadership that the Romans called *gravitas*.<sup>86</sup>

In one sense McMahon had grasped a poisoned chalice: the Liberal ascendancy was on the wane. The party was gripped by a malaise as the twin pillars of Liberal hegemony — superior economic management at home and foreign policy abroad<sup>87</sup> — had effectively collapsed.<sup>88</sup> There was nothing in McMahon’s career to suggest even remotely that he could turn the tide that was running so strongly against the Liberals. There was a current of thought within the party that the cause was already lost, and that the future lay in the loss of the next election followed by a reconstruction of the party under a new, and modern, leader. McMahon in 1972 was anything but modern: ‘an ageing man, belong[ing] to a declining phase of Liberalism’.<sup>89</sup> McMahon simply had no credibility among his despondent followers; it was an attitude that was transmitted to the electorate. The loss of the election in December 1972 was merely the last rites for a Liberal golden age now passed; it had been savagely eroded under Gorton and now dispatched under McMahon. McMahon lost the leadership but remained in parliament,

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<sup>83</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>84</sup> McMahon represented that enduring NSW tradition of free trade tracing back to George Reid. It was partly because of this that McEwen, arch-protectionist, refused to serve under McMahon when Holt disappeared. (See Peter Sekules, ‘Sir William McMahon’ in Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers*, *op. cit.*, p. 320).

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>87</sup> In 1972, inflation was running at its highest rate for 20 years and unemployment was at its highest in 10 years. Public opposition was mounting to the war in Vietnam and conscription.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>89</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

obscure and irrelevant. He was arguably the least competent and most inept Prime Minister in Australian history.

#### *Lewis and Willis*

By the time Sir Robert Askin decided to retire at the end of 1974, his own popularity had plummeted, and the Liberals seemed tired and insensitive after more than nine years in office. Furthermore, Labor was undergoing a resurgence under a new and attractive leader in Neville Wran. Askin was always going to be a hard act to follow. He was the only successful Liberal leader in a generation in New South Wales, and under his leadership he had not only united a once hopelessly divided party but also brought electoral success on a record-breaking four occasions. He had ruled unchallenged and largely on his terms, and the time and manner of his going was of his choosing entirely.

His successor, Tom Lewis, was by no means the favourite for the job, and his eventual success came as a surprise to many. Askin's able deputy for a decade and a half, Eric Willis, was always regarded as the front runner, and one newspaper reported Lewis as 'definitely interested but he is a long shot'.<sup>90</sup> When Askin approached Willis with an offer of his active support for the leadership, Willis declined, according to one insider's account,<sup>91</sup> saying he would prefer to win the leadership on his own merits — a response that confirmed Askin's lingering doubts about his deputy's political instincts. While there remains a doubt as to whether Askin kept an earlier promise and voted for Willis, he certainly canvassed support for Lewis who confirmed that Askin 'called me in to tell me who to call and who to see, and he called people himself...'<sup>92</sup>. Lewis, in the meantime, had garnered crucial support from backbenchers eager for promotion; Willis did nothing, and Lewis won. It was a most unorthodox choice; and Lewis, in many ways a very traditional Liberal, turned out to be a most unorthodox Premier.

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<sup>90</sup> *Australian*, 19 November 1971.

<sup>91</sup> Geoffrey Reading, *High Climbers: Askin & Others*, Ferguson, Sydney, 1989, p. 49

<sup>92</sup> Interview with the Hon. T. L. Lewis, 2 August 2002, Moss Vale.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

Born into comfortable circumstances in Adelaide in 1922, the son of the managing director of Goldsborough Mort and nephew of the legendary Essington Lewis (1881-1961), the head of BHP and wartime director of munitions, Thomas Lancelot Lewis attended the élite St Peters College, Adelaide, a few years senior to the future South Australian Labor Premier, Don Dunstan. The family also had farming interests which engendered in the young Lewis a keen interest in the environment. A streak of politics infused the Lewis family: his grandfather, John Lewis, had been a member of the South Australian Legislative Council, and his brother, Alexander, was a member of the Legislative Council in Western Australia. When he was 14 his father, Lance, died and Essington Lewis, a strict and exacting mentor, took over his upbringing, deeply impressing on him such virtues as punctuality — ‘you’re on time all the time’, was an oft-repeated maxim.

Elected at a by-election in 1957, Lewis arrived at a far from auspicious time to be a Liberal member in the New South Wales Parliament: Labor had been in office since 1941, and the Liberals were deeply divided. When Askin made his successful bid for the leadership in 1959, Lewis was a staunch ally. At the same time, Eric Willis, Member for Earlwood since 1950, was elected deputy leader — a position he would hold until Lewis trumped him by winning the leadership — and the Premier’s job — in 1974. Like many of his colleagues he did not warm to Willis, finding him dry, academic and humourless. He recalled a Cabinet meeting after the Liberals came into government in 1965 when the Country Party deputy Premier, Charles Cutler ‘blew his top’ after Willis stopped the meeting to complain that a comma had been left out of the submission being considered. Willis was not ‘one of the boys’, and the heavily ex-service coalition had its own pecking order — Willis, who had served in the Intelligence Corps as a sergeant was looked on as a ‘desk soldier’.<sup>93</sup>

Lewis, who succeeded Askin as Premier in 1975, made national headlines with his decision to break with convention when the Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

appointed his Attorney-General, Senator Lionel Murphy from NSW, to the High Court and Lewis refused to appoint a replacement senator of the same party. Instead, he insisted on appointing — as he called him — a political ‘neuter’ in the form of the 72-year-old mayor of Albury, Cleaver Bunton. It triggered immediate outrage, and not only from the Labor Party and its supporters, but from key sections of his own party. The *Daily Telegraph*, which like the rest of the press was highly critical of the move, called it a ‘shabby business’, and singled out Lewis for particular criticism.

He may have hoped it would instantly establish him in the boots-and-all mould of Sir Robert Askin, Mr Joh Bjelke-Petersen or Sir Henry Bolte. It didn't. Instead it showed him up as a man arrogant enough to believe he can disregard the wishes of the people – a man cynical enough to twist to his own advantage a tried and trusted democratic tradition...Unless Mr Lewis learns to play by the rules it will be difficult to have confidence in him as Premier.<sup>94</sup>

Lewis' image was deeply tarnished, not two months into the job as Premier. His own Liberal colleagues were divided over the issue, and the first of a stream of private doubts began to emerge in public about the suitability of Lewis as Premier. Six months into his term as Premier, the *Sydney Morning Herald* was speculating whether the Liberals would be so bold as to mount a challenge to Lewis who had made a ‘clumsy start’ with his ‘penchant for political bull-headedness’ and his lack of skills as a communicator.

By late in 1975, when Liberal stocks should have been high because of the rapid disintegration of the Whitlam Government, the dissatisfaction with Lewis was palpable. On 20 January 1976, Lewis returned from lunch and entered the party room oblivious of moves against him. A motion to declare the leadership vacant was carried by 22 votes to 11, and Willis was the only nominee.<sup>95</sup> On the way out of the meeting, Lewis turned to two members who had voted against him, saying: ‘You could have done the courtesy of coming to see me first’. One retorted: ‘You wouldn't have listened anyway. You never listened’.<sup>96</sup> Of his own loss of support among his colleagues, he had this to say.

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<sup>94</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 27 February 1975.

<sup>95</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 1976.

<sup>96</sup> *Bulletin*, 31 January 1976

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

I would like to have lasted longer, but that's probably my fault. I didn't have Bob [Askin's] touch; I reckon I was too busy getting things done, and Bob used to get you in for a drink and say 'I'm going to look after you next time'. He had that many promises, he would never carry them out. But I realise of course that that is probably what one should have done. I should have paid more attention to the troops.<sup>97</sup>

Like the Liberals at Federal level in 1971 with the removal of Gorton, the installation of Eric Willis, for all, his perceived orthodoxy, came at a time of utter disarray and division in the ranks. Willis tried to paper over the cracks, but his actions smacked of panic as he moved successively to abandon an unpopular petrol tax against which Wran had campaigned remorselessly and to set up a Royal Commission into prisons.<sup>98</sup> There was still a smoldering resentment among those in the Lewis camp at the January coup, and Willis was faced with the Herculean task of curbing Wran who was getting highly favourable media coverage, especially in the area of drawing attention to public transport shortcomings.<sup>99</sup> A big swing to Labor in a by-election in Orange caused by the retirement of the former Country Party leader, Cutler, accentuated the trend as did the resignation of a former Liberal Minister and Lewis supporter in the marginal seat of Monaro and the inept handling by Willis of a land rezoning scandal.<sup>100</sup> Rather than face the by-election in Monaro, Willis opted for an early election on 1 May, and lost.

The task of promoting Willis was a formidable one, and the campaign slogan adopted by the Liberals 'Willis will' was ridiculed by Wran as 'What will Willis will?'<sup>101</sup> Willis was a cautious, reserved and cold man who had earned the nickname 'Stainless Steel' from his ruthlessly efficient political style. While he always had a core of support within the Liberal Party, he was far from popular among his colleagues who, while they respected

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<sup>97</sup> Lewis interview.

<sup>98</sup> Rodney Cavalier, 'Labor Prepares for Government', in Ernie Chaples, Helen Nelson & Ken Turner (eds.), *The Wran Model: Electoral Politics in New South Wales 1981 and 1984*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p. 34.

<sup>99</sup> For an account of how Wran used the news media on this issue by joining commuters, see Brian Dale, *Ascent to Power: Wran and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 85-6.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 87-91.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* p. 104.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

his abilities, did not regard him as a man who could inspire the party or the wider electorate. As a profile writer in *The Australian* noted in 1978 when Willis announced his retirement from politics:

Sir Eric was never much good when it came to real leadership, and that faction infighting, and his own unique blundering, eventually split the party into almost as many factions as there were members.<sup>102</sup>

#### *Thompson*

Lindsay Thompson was well known to Victorians when he succeeded to the Premier's job, albeit in unhappy circumstances, in 1981. He had been a long-serving Minister in both the Bolte and the Hamer governments; in addition, he became known nationally, and was accorded hero status, when, in 1972, he dramatically offered himself as a hostage in place of the six children and a female teacher kidnapped from a school at Faraday, near Bendigo, and held for ransom.<sup>103</sup> An experienced Minister with a favourable public image, Thompson ordinarily would have had much going for him, but the Government was in terminal decline, and its disarray had become a public embarrassment. Indeed, Thompson's long association with the Government was perhaps a disadvantage in that he was seen merely as part of the old crowd rather than a new leader with fresh ideas and the promise of new directions.

#### **Loner**

#### *Hollway*

Thomas Tuke Hollway, twice Premier of Victoria, remains to this day an enigmatic figure in the history of the Liberal Party, as much for his political style as his spectacular exit from the party he had led. He was, as Kate White has noted, a most unorthodox

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<sup>102</sup> *Australian*, 22 March 1978.

<sup>103</sup> See Lindsay Thompson, *I Remember*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 161-81.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

Liberal leader,<sup>104</sup> with something of a bohemian bent to his make up, he counted among his close friends prominent trade union officials with whom he socialised; his conflicts with the Right-wing of the party were legendary; and, when in government, he ruled in a way that all but cut out both his own Cabinet as well as the party machinery.

Hollway's preference for governing from his suite at the Windsor Hotel may be attributed partly to an erratic and individualistic streak always in evidence, but perhaps more so as a result of the intrigues and political warfare that constituted political life in Victoria at that time. His experiences at the hands of the Country Party as well as his battles with the old guard of the United Australia Party<sup>105</sup> taught him to be wary of the political establishment of which he was both a member (by virtue of his office) as well as a sworn antagonist (by temperament). Hollway's provincial city ethos invested his liberalism with a strongly reformist streak that was at odds with, successively, the city financiers of the UAP and prominent Liberal businessmen such as Arthur Warner. While active in the formation of the Liberal Party, and a participant in the Canberra and Albury conferences, he was essentially, in style at least, a politician of the old school — a free agent, not in thrall to any organisation. Hollway's conflicts with his own party were very much, apart from personal temperament, a clash between the old unfettered ways and the new party-dominant mode. For the party that championed individualism, Hollway proved too much; the experience would chasten the party in coming years to look more closely and critically at aspiring leaders, but this had been clearly forgotten by 1968 when John Gorton, another loner, was elevated to leadership.

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<sup>104</sup> See Kate White, 'Hollway: an atypical Liberal leader?', *Politics*, XIII (2) November, 1978.

<sup>105</sup> Hollway had been a strong and vocal critic of the National Union, the fun-raising arm of the United Australia Party. (See *Age*, 14, 15, 18, 21, 22, 25 November 1941).

## *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

### *Treatt*

There was nothing erratic or intemperate in the make-up of Vernon Treatt; rather, he was a man of rigid conformity and inflexible disposition: in many ways he was the antithesis of Hollway as regards personality and habits, but it was this very severity that set him apart from his parliamentary colleagues as it did from the party organisation. Treatt for all his fine qualities should never have been asked to lead; he simply could not. It was perhaps a reflection on the available talent; but, on paper at least, Treatt looked impressive: BA, LLB from Sydney University, Rhodes Scholar, Military Medal, and admitted to the Bar in 1924. Fourteen years later, aged 43, he entered parliament as Member for Woollahra, and the following year became Minister for Justice. Following the Mair Government's defeat in 1941 he became a King's Counsel. In the somewhat unusual circumstances that attended the birth of the Liberals in New South Wales — the death of the leader, Weaver, just months after its formation and then the surprising reinstatement of former Premier and leader, Mair, who in turn resigned in 1946 to contest the Senate election — Treatt emerged as leader. Successive election defeats in 1947, 1950 and 1953 sapped the morale of the party, and Treatt became even more withdrawn. 'A lone wolf,' his colleagues claimed, 'can never lead a pack'.<sup>106</sup>

### *Amateur*

There is in Liberal thinking a recurring search for the Messiah.<sup>107</sup> It re-emerges in times of electoral downturn in the party's fortunes which are usually accompanied by intense infighting and factionalism. The thinking usually runs along the lines of a white knight, untainted by the past and unburdened by political baggage, suddenly appearing and willing to lead the bewildered and wandering flock out of political Gethsemane and back

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<sup>106</sup>Holgate, *op. cit.*, 1962, pp. 57-8.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

into government. It was just such an outbreak of this sentiment that plucked John Hewson from obscurity into leadership in 1990 after the Liberals had suffered four successive election defeats.<sup>108</sup> Hewson, while possessed of admirable policy drive, lacked political skills and it was this shortcoming alone that led to his losing the so called ‘unloseable’ 1993 election to a skilled political professional in Labor’s Paul Keating. Hewson was a political amateur.

#### *Norman*

Into the maelstrom of Victorian politics in 1947 came Leslie Norman, tall, dark and imposing; a staunch Methodist and anti-socialist and prominent in Moral Rearmament, he was by profession an accountant, and had been a prisoner of war. Untainted by the Macfarlan split and aloof from much of the intriguing surrounding Hollway, Norman looked like the clean break from the past that the party was seeking after it deposed Hollway. But a man of just four years experience in parliament coupled with some inflexible views did not augur well for the Liberals, especially when pitted against veteran tacticians in both the Labor and Country parties. Twice in the tumultuous year of 1952, when Victoria had three governments, the Premiership was there for Norman’s asking, but on each occasion he declined it. The first time was when he had the casting vote in the party room on whether to accept coalition with the Country Party; the second was when he was offered a deal by the Hollway rebels to support electoral reform.<sup>109</sup> Had he accepted either offer, the Liberals almost certainly would not have split again later that year, and would have been unlikely to suffer the stinging electoral defeat delivered as a result. Norman simply gave himself no room in which to manoeuvre — tactical death for a politician. He suffered the ultimate ignominy: defeat in his hitherto

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<sup>107</sup> See Norman Abjorensen, ‘Desperate Search for Party Saviour’, *Canberra Times*, 12 July 2001.

<sup>108</sup> For a detailed account see Norman Abjorensen, *John Hewson: A Biography*, Lothian, Melbourne, 1993.

<sup>109</sup> See obituary by Alan Hunt, *Age*, 25 August 1997; also *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, 16 September 1997.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

safe Liberal seat of Glen Iris by Hollway, the man he deposed. He never returned to politics.

#### *Robson and Morton*

The brief unhappy interlude of Murray Robson's leadership of the Liberals in New South Wales is instructive only in that it shows Askin's cunning (some might say cynicism) in orchestrating his election. Again, though, Robson was seen as a circuit-breaker when the party was deadlocked after Treatt's resignation between those supporting Askin and those in favour of Morton. Described as a 'swashbuckling ex-lieutenant-colonel of an Infantry regiment [and] fiery and flamboyant', Robson brought to debates the passion that Treatt had so obviously lacked, but he also displayed, to both colleagues and the party organisation, 'an extraordinary want of tact and diplomacy'. Relations everywhere degenerated into a series of personal feuds as Robson insisted on running things his way, attempting 'to lead his party as if he were a company sergeant-major'. The supposed popular appeal that Robson had, and which Treatt had so clearly lacked, was never put to the test. As support ebbed away almost daily, and Robson defied head office in seeking to make his own arrangements with the Country Party, and also in arranging for the filling of a vacancy in the Legislative Council. A party revolt saw him deposed.<sup>110</sup>

The subsequent election of Morton was a seeming return to normality; he was, in a sense, 'the Liberal stereotype'<sup>111</sup> who had worked his way up from office boy to head of an automobile parts firm, and before entering parliament in 1947 at the age of 37 he had been the youngest mayor of Mosman after just a year on the council. At a time when the party was under attack for its part-time approach to politics as well as a high rate of absenteeism from parliament,<sup>112</sup> Morton almost from the outset was criticised for the

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<sup>110</sup> Holgate, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-6.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66 fn.

<sup>112</sup> It was a frequent topic of discussion in Liberal Party circles. For example, *Liberal Opinion*, October 1950, had commented on the number of divisions missed by members, noting tartly: 'Those who haven't

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

amount of time he devoted to his business interests; moreover Liberal colleagues complained that they were more extensive and time-consuming than Morton had indicated. Although he came close to victory in the 1959 election, the hard fact was that the Liberals were still in opposition and there was a growing perception that Morton was, in the eyes of voters and colleagues alike, 'a loser, and a part-time one as well'.<sup>113</sup> Morton fended off one challenge in April 1959,<sup>114</sup> but the crunch came in July when Morton chose to leave Sydney for a ten-day holiday in Cairns when several of his colleagues claimed he should have been preparing for the Spring Budget session of parliament.<sup>115</sup> Askin, a professed professional politician, was elected unopposed.

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the time or the natural enthusiasm to do that for which they were elected must make way for others'. In 1959, State Council at its meeting on 9 December 1959 resolved to advise each member's electorate conference of its local member's attendance record at voting divisions. (Quoted by Holgate, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-4.)

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>114</sup> His challenger, Douglas Darby, cited his reason for mounting the challenge as the principle that the Leader of the Opposition had to give a full-time commitment. He said: 'This is provided for in an extra £1000 salary, £250 expense allowance, a car with driver, an office and a staff of three. The Leader of the Opposition has a task more onerous than a Minister of the Crown, for he has critically to observe the work of all Ministries. No man can give the direction, the initiative and the research required by the Leader and at the same time actively manage an extensive private business'. (*Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1959).

<sup>115</sup> Holgate, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-1.

## 5.2 Typical Australians, atypical Liberals?

The 1948 appeal by Casey for the Liberals to reach out and connect with the ordinary people<sup>116</sup> is exemplified in the rise to power of leaders such as Bolte and Askin. The great challenge for the new Liberal Party, in a structural sense, was to create a party of mass appeal in a way that its predecessors had never been, and supported by a permanent organisation. The other great challenge was to produce leaders with a far wider appeal than had been the case in the past. Bolte and Askin, as did Playford in South Australia and Brand in Western Australia, served in the ranks in the armed forces, rubbing shoulders and living day in and day out with all comers. As non-commissioned officers, they knew the value of conveying orders to the ranks and ensuring that they were understood and carried out; the transition each of them made to political leadership drew heavily on these experiences which each applied, in turn, to party and to electorate. Important in their make-up and the way in which they related to their followers was their knowledge of men.<sup>117</sup>

Both Bolte and Askin came to the leadership of parties that had been damaged by infighting and consequent electoral rejection. In each case unity was achieved and electoral success followed. Each in his own way brought to fruition the hopes of the party founders in the 1940s that an appeal could be made to ordinary men and women across a whole range of issues, irrespective of economic status, occupation or creed. If the new Liberal Party of Menzies embodied the professionalism that its predecessors lacked as well as a significant membership base and a permanent organisation between

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<sup>116</sup> R G Casey, Federal President of the Liberal Party, address to Ninth State Council of Victorian division, Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne, 3 Dec 1947. UMA, Liberal Party records, 1/1/2. See also Chapter 1, p 72.

<sup>117</sup> Clearly, each had drawn extensively from social and sporting contacts in honing keen interpersonal skills. Their military experience would also have helped in this regard. The Australian Army's *Handbook on Leadership* emphasises the importance to leadership of a knowledge of human behaviour. 'To get the best performance from yourself and from the men you lead, you must first understand the basic principles which cause human behaviour and motivation. You must appreciate the reasons why the individual behaves as he does and you must develop insight into how people are likely to behave in different situations' (2-1, 201).

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elections, Bolte and Askin, in their apparent classlessness and identification with ordinary Australians, contributed a new and successful style of leadership that signalled at last that the Liberals had become truly a mass party with mass appeal.

Each exhibited a streak of larrikinism, a curiously Australian habit of gently mocking authority. They drank, they smoked, they gambled; their manner of speaking was vernacular; it was, in a sense, a political style that bore the distinctive characteristics that Hasluck noted in the gait of marching Australian soldiers, a certain ‘loose and confident stride that only Australian soldiers have’.<sup>118</sup> Each also came to represent a stereotypical view of their respective States. Bolte’s aggressive ‘sell Victoria’ campaign combined a canny populism with an identification of Victoria personified; Holmes has written that it would be ‘difficult to imagine him as Premier of any other State’.<sup>119</sup> Askin’s perceived rakish lifestyle — frequently photographed, for example, smartly dressed and nattily hatted at the betting ring at the races — conformed to a stereotype of how many Australians, both inside and outside New South Wales, regarded Sydney. Each became an illustration of what Holmes has called ‘the subtle and complex ways which relate stereotypes and State politics’.<sup>120</sup> On a broader level, each had an appeal, at least initially, as a character type embedded deep within the Australian psyche, the descendant of the self-reliant bushman; this was what Russel Ward called the myth of the ‘typical Australian’. He was, above all, ‘a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others...He is a great improviser, ever willing to “have a go” at anything...He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion...’<sup>121</sup> The analogy is not perfect, especially so as both accepted knighthoods late in their careers, but nonetheless denotes an element in their appeal as plain men, embodying to some extent a then prevailing notion of a people’s idea of itself and the stereotype. This becomes especially clear when both leaders are seen in contrast to those who preceded them. In the case of Bolte he

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<sup>118</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p. 625.

<sup>119</sup> Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 1-2.

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presented as a much more the ‘typical Australian’ of Ward’s description than the reserved Oldham, intense Norman, quasi-bohemian Hollway or stolid Argyle; with Askin he, too, stood in sharp contrast to the businessman Morton, the gadfly solicitor Robson and the aloof and introverted Treatt.

Neither Bolte nor Askin had a successor that was in any way like them in style. The only successful Liberal in NSW after Askin was Nick Greiner who returned the coalition to office in 1988, but Greiner was a very different leader.<sup>122</sup> Jeff Kennett in Victoria, who won the 1992 election, openly admired Bolte and had some of his brashness, but not his judgement. Whether such an earthy approach to politics as that adopted by Bolte and Askin would have succeeded in the later and far more intrusive television era than they experienced is problematic. In any case, the rise of the ‘new politics’ that saw a retreat from the heroic era of development to ‘quality of life’ quickly made that style archaic. So, too, were the perceived wartime virtues of service and loyalty, and the types in which they were embodied, on the wane as a new generation, which knew not war or depression, developed its own values and sought its own heroes.

It is perhaps an ironic footnote to the era of the Liberal ascendancy that the success of men like Bolte and Askin became salutary lessons for the Labor Party in, first, underlining the importance of leadership, and, secondly, in electing leaders with the ability to reach across the old class divide as did Whitlam, Dunstan, Wran and later Cain in their appeal to the middle classes. Bolte and Askin, it is argued, played a key role in dismantling the traditional class appeal of Australian politics.

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In times of uncertainty, the electorate has looked for strong and uncompromising leadership: Bruce in the tense years after the Great War, Menzies during the uneasy Cold

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<sup>122</sup> Greiner was a Catholic as was the man who succeeded him as Premier, John Fahey. It was an interesting commentary on how times had changed that it was not even an issue that Catholics were leading the Liberal Party.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

War and Fraser after the chaos and troubling dismissal of Whitlam. Bruce brought a modicum of stability to a wounded society, but was faced with issues he knew little about nor had the personal experience of the prevailing and worsening conditions. Fraser sought to impose a certainty on the political process that had been savagely undermined, but his own dealings with his ministers generated a chaos of their own. The limited and rigid social experience of both Bruce and Fraser meant that they could not alter the way in which they operated, nor could they detect deep changes in the electorate; and even if they had, there is little indication that they could have made the necessary adjustments. Their leadership, as was their tenure, was essentially prescriptive. Menzies, however, was a far more skilled politician, but his imperial adventures (Suez 1956),<sup>123</sup> his fulsome admiration for the monarchy and his acceptance of an archaic sinecure all pointed to his being blind to the changes about him; a qualification to his undoubted success as a leader was his failure in not seeing (or refusing to see) this and allowing the party he had helped create to ossify.

The Liberals have seldom managed succession well,<sup>124</sup> Hamer in Victoria being a rare exception, and possibly also the 1995 transition from Downer to Howard. Instances of succession suggest that those in the innermost circles of the party fail to understand the dynamics of successful leadership. Such discredited leaders as Snedden and Lewis, for example, had the opportunity to observe sound leadership at first hand under Menzies and Askin respectively, but what they saw was only the outward manifestation, not the chemistry or the substance. The evidence of this is in their later laments that they should have spent more time with their followers. This was to miss the point entirely, and is sadly indicative of the lack of understanding about what leadership entails, even among those elevated to political leadership.

Given that the Liberal vote under most circumstances will be below that of the ALP, the most successful Liberal leaders are those whose policies, as well as style and

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, Watt's comments quoted in Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed, op. cit.*, p. 354.

### *Leadership in the Liberal Party: Conclusion*

presentation, appeal to both the uncommitted voter and the soft supporter of Labor. The Liberal Party will never be immensely popular, but it has shown that it can produce leaders who blur the traditional lines of political demarcation and in so doing hold potential appeal for cross-over voters, as John Howard has repeatedly shown in his election wins of 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004.. In this sense, leadership is of the utmost importance in enabling the Liberal Party to win elections at both Commonwealth and State level, yet it appears to be the least understood when it comes to a changing of the guard.

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<sup>124</sup> Menzies is often cited as an example, but while the transition to Holt was seamless in terms of maintaining party unity, it can be argued that Menzies delayed his retirement too long, and that the tensions which followed Holt's death were a direct result of this.

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