Ming was no wet

Robert Menzies was soundly conservative, whereas his great hope Malcolm Fraser turned out dripping wet

PETER COSTELLO

At the beginning of August, two books were launched in Melbourne on the same day — about an hour apart and about a mile apart. One was launched by the Prime Minister. She got the name of the book wrong: it was actually entitled *Fair Cop* and told the story of Victoria's first female Police Commissioner, Christine Nixon. Nixon achieved enormous pre-publicity for the book by justifying her decision to leave the Command Post and go out for dinner the night Victoria suffered its worst ever natural disaster when 173 people died in bushfires. Criticism of her was, she claimed, part of a vendetta by News Limited and other unnamed conspirators.

The other book was the edited collection of previously unpublished letters from a Prime Minister to his daughter. With an introduction written by the daughter — Heather Henderson — the volume gives us an insight into the private world of Sir Robert Menzies at key times between 1955 and 1975.

One of these books is well worth reading.

Heather Henderson began writing letters to her parents when her husband, the Australian diplomat Peter Henderson, was posted overseas soon after their marriage. The letters her father wrote in return are published in this volume covering the time when she was living in Jakarta (1955), Geneva (1960-63), London (1967-70) and Manila (1973-74).

In addition, she publishes her father's letters written during the time he was overseas at the University of Virginia in 1966-7. As a result we get insights into the 1955 election: 'I find it impossible to believe that, after the events of the last fortnight, the people of Australia will proceed to make Bert [Evatt] Prime Minister'; into the 1961 Credit Squeeze election: 'No more than four or five seats are in danger' (in fact the Coalition lost 15); the 1963, 1966 and 1969 elections (which Menzies, like Don in *Don's Party*, thought Gough Whitlam would win); and the lead-up to Whitlam's double dissolution election of 1974.

The timing of the letters is governed by the postings of Peter Henderson. Presumably the father and daughter spoke by telephone or in person during the periods she was back in Canberra. The family may not like the idea, but we can only wish that Henderson had been overseas much longer. That would have enriched the treasure trove even more!

The picture that emerges is of a doting father and grandfather who despite great pressure takes an interest in the minutiae of family life. There is gossip about relatives and friends and some amusing anecdotes: 'We dined with … the new Presbyterian Minister at Brighton … He is a good storyteller and accepted with relish a martini before dinner and some wine with it! There is hope for the Presbyterian Church yet.'

There is interesting material about Menzies' finances, including his hunt for a suitable house in Melbourne and provision for his children and the education of his grandchildren. After leaving politics he published two highly successful books. He complains that so much of his publishing royalties are taken in tax and declaims: 'I can only remember with shame that, for so many years, I was head of so mercenary and grasping a government as I now (as an author) realise it to have been.' He is not the only former politician to feel that way!

We should not be surprised that the private Menzies was much devoted to his family given the focus of his most famous speech, 'The Forgotten People', in which he wrote: 'My home is where my wife and children are; the instinct to be with them is the great instinct of civilised man; the instinct to give them a chance in life is a noble instinct, not to make them leaners but lifters.'

The snapshots of political life in these letters show how some things have irrevocably changed. Menzies writes that he plans a three-and-a-half week campaign for the 1961 election, during which he will limit himself to 13 meetings, give six broadcasts of 10 minutes each, and make several appearances on television, 'so I will not be unemployed'. In a modern campaign this level of engagement would hardly fill a week. There were times when I did 13 media interviews in a day! Today's party leaders would stage several events a day to placate the media outlets which are now running continuous coverage. The quantity of media and the demands of that insatiable beast have changed politics forever. This is not to say that greater quantity has made for greater quality. Menzies remarks of his Labor opponent in the aftermath of the 1961 election: 'Arthur Calwell … is suffering from considerable cerebral excitement and has become so garrulous that he is in the newspapers every day.' These days it is hard to think that an Opposition leader would *not* be in the newspaper on a daily basis.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* was a vigorous opponent of Menzies in that election and more generally. But interestingly he does not complain about the *Age* in Melbourne. The *Age* was yet to make its fateful lurch to Labor which began in 1972 and became its regular position in the 1980s and 1990s, right up until more recent years when it has been excited by the Greens.

Of course, nothing has changed at the ABC. In exasperation about his treatment in one interview, Menzies records: 'One lives and learns. I shall now return to my old decision never to do a TV appearance

for the ABC.' It is interesting how impenetrable the left-leaning culture of that institution has remained through the years of change and differing governments. The one thing that has been conclusively shown is that the ABC board has no influence and that the staff are completely in control. After ten years (1996 to 2006) at the helm of the ABC, former chairman Donald McDonald recently took to these pages to write of the need to reform it as if it is a revelation to him. We can expect the current chairman to do the same once his term is completed and he too is no longer in a position to do anything. Doing nothing seems to be the default setting for the ABC board and chairman.

But Menzies' observations on the direction of the Liberal party once it lost office and went into Opposition in 1972 will generate the most interest for political scholars. After a long period in government, the Liberal party had the chance — and indeed the duty — to examine its core beliefs and political direction. At this time a school of thought took hold that the party should become more progressive in response to the spirit of the times. In Victoria this strand was represented by State President Peter Hardie. It has at times been described as 'liberal', sometimes 'moderate', and sometimes more dismissively as 'wet'. Often those of this opinion would adopt the mantle of Menzies, in particular citing his statement in the 1967 book *Afternoon Light* that in forming the new non-Labor party, 'We took the name 'Liberal' because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments, in no sense reactionary but believing in the individual, his rights, and his enterprise, and rejecting the socialist panacea.'

In private, Menzies was scathing of this progressive movement inside the party. In a letter to Heather Henderson in July 1974 he writes: 'Why should I, at my age, have to be worrying myself about what is happening to the party which I created, a party which had principles to which I most firmly adhere, principles which have now been completely abandoned by what they call 'little l' Liberals.' Menzies privately dismissed then Liberal Leader Bill Snedden in these terms: 'that poor Snedden is, politically, an idiot.'

At the time, Snedden and Andrew Peacock were the standard-bearers of the liberal wing of the Liberal party. Like most of those outside that circle in the Victorian Division, Menzies saw the great hope of a return to more traditional Liberal values as personified by Malcolm Fraser. Fraser firmly represented the Right of the Liberal party in those days: a hawk on Vietnam, tough on unions, and a supporter of smaller government! My earliest votes at the Liberal Party State Council in the 1970s were to support conservative backers and supporters of Malcolm Fraser then battling the 'little l' Liberals who had taken over the Young Liberal Movement.

Fraser's view is that after he lost office everybody changed their positions except him, leaving him on the Left of the Liberal party and now, in fact, outside it. This is why contemporaneous documents are important. They cannot be rewritten in the light of subsequent events. Menzies was no wet. Neither was Fraser when he was seeking the leadership and the Prime Ministership. Fraser's support came from those who thought the party should abandon its march to Whitlam's progressivism, not accelerate it. Which explains why Fraser had so much support in blocking Supply in 1975. Only a few isolated moderates like Alan Missen had qualms about it.

I was glad to see Menzies take the view that the Senate should not deny Supply to a government. He had a strong view about the responsibility of the House of Representatives in financial matters. I believe in the primacy of the House. Of course, the corollary is that a government should behave responsibly in financial matters.

People will read Menzies' 1974 letters and say that he was old and cranky and, like so many retired politicians, motivated by the thought that he could have done a better job than his successors. All of that is true. But that does not mean he could not have done a better job. And many are looking at the lot we have today and thinking it could hardly be possible to do a worse job!

Menzies could be scathing in private, but one of the things that stands out in these letters is his capacity to be generous and acknowledge the contribution of his colleagues. He believed in cabinet government. The ANZUS Treaty was signed 60 years ago this week. He could have claimed credit for it or listed it as an achievement of the 'Menzies government', but he said, in one of his last speeches as an old and frail man: 'The ANZUS pact ... will always be honourably associated in my memory with the name Sir Percy Spender, and our happy and advantageous relationship with Japan, always to be remembered in conjunction with the names Lord Casey and John McEwen.' He understood that to acknowledge the success of others in his cabinet made him a greater, not a lesser, man.

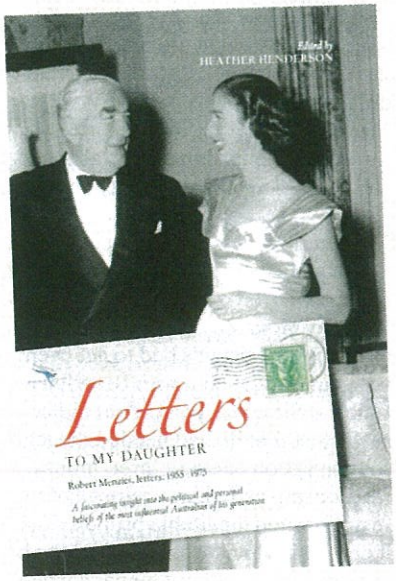
So here we have a snapshot of a man who was tough but generous, who believed in the Parliament. He was dismissive of the pretensions of State Premiers. He was thoroughly anti-communist and believed in private enterprise — there are lots of nuggets to be mined in these letters. But most of all he believed in family. This volume turns out, without a skerrick of sentimentality, to be a love story — one man's love for his family and particularly his daughter. We are lucky she has let us in on it.

In his own words

As you know, I think that easily the top man in the Opposition is Malcolm Fraser, who really has a sense of statesmanship and who, unlike his predecessors, looks beyond the next day's leading article. But they have bypassed Malcolm.
7 January 1974

The main trouble in my state is that we have the State Executive of the Liberal party, which is dominated by what they now call 'Liberals with a small l' — that is to say, Liberals who believe in nothing but who still believe in anything if they think it worth a few votes. The whole thing is tragic.
8 April 1974

Why should I, at my age, have to be worrying myself about what is happening to the party which I created, a party which had principles to which I most firmly adhere, principles which have now been completely abandoned by what they call 'little l' Liberals.
24 July 1974



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