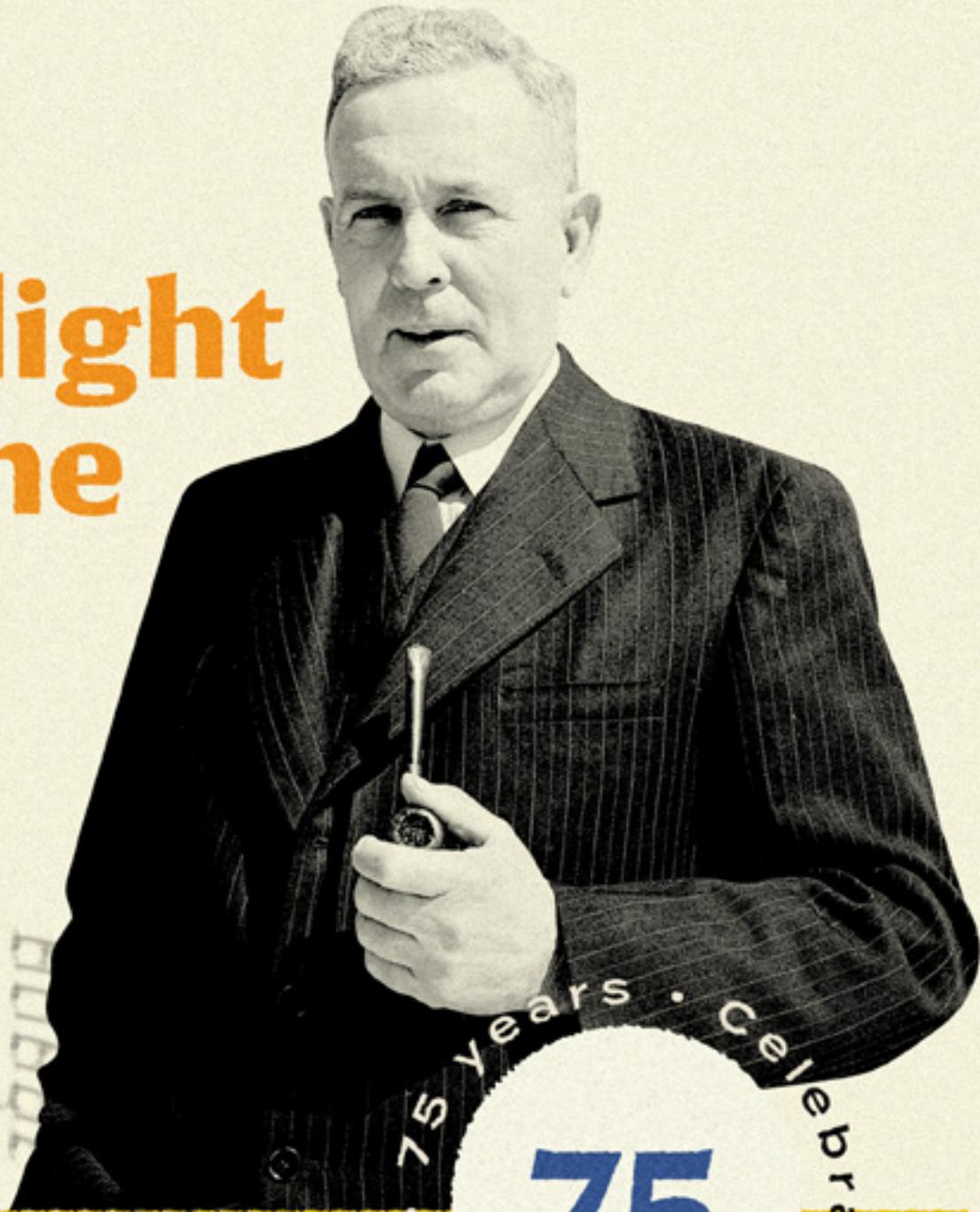


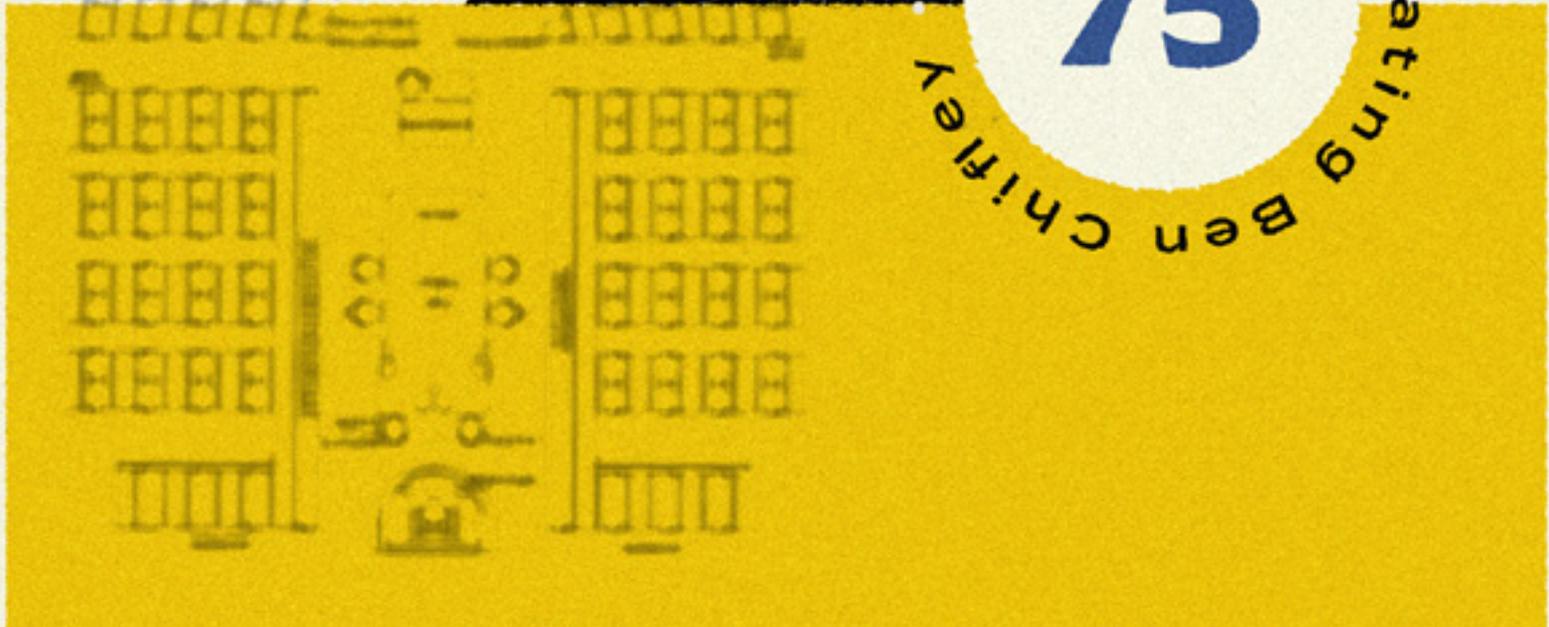
# The light on the hill.

Celebrating the  
75th Anniversary of  
Ben Chifley's Prime  
Ministership



75 Years • Celebrating Ben Chifley

75





I have had the privilege of leading the Labor Party for nearly four years. They have not been easy times and it has not been an easy job. It is a man-killing job and would be impossible if it were not for the help of my colleagues and members of the movement. No Labor Minister or leader ever has an easy job. The urgency that rests behind the Labour movement, pushing it on to do things, to create new conditions, to reorganise the economy of the country, always means that the people who work within the Labour movement, people who lead, can never have an easy job. The job of the evangelist is never easy. Because of the turn of fortune's wheel your Premier (Mr McGirr) and I have gained some prominence in the Labour movement. But the strength of the movement cannot

come from us. We may make plans and pass legislation to help and direct the economy of the country. But the job of getting the things the people of the country want comes from the roots of the Labour movement – the people who support it. When I sat at a Labor meeting in the country with only ten or fifteen men there, I found a man sitting beside me who had been working in the Labour movement for fifty-four years. I have no doubt that many of you have been doing the same, not hoping for any advantage from the movement, not hoping for any personal gain, but because you believe in a movement that has been built up to bring better conditions to the people. Therefore, the success of the Labour Party at the next elections depends entirely, as it always has done, on the people who work.



Ben Chifley 1946 At the Dominion Conference



Ben Chifley 1949 at the Australian National University

I try to think of the Labour movement, not as putting an extra sixpence into somebody's pocket, or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people. We have a great objective – the light on the hill – which we aim to reach by working the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. If it were not for that, the Labour movement would not be worth fighting for.

If the movement can make someone more comfortable, give to some father or mother a greater feeling of security for their children, a feeling that if a depression

comes there will be work, that the government is striving its hardest to do its best, then the Labour movement will be completely justified.

It does not matter about persons like me who have our limitations. I only hope that the generosity, kindness and friendliness shown to me by thousands of my colleagues in the Labour movement will continue to be given to the movement and add zest to its work.



**JB. Chifley in speech to the NSW Labor Party Conference, 12 June 1949.**

“All who were privileged to know the late Ben Chifley were impressed by his sincerity, integrity and devotion to duty. These great qualities, together with his work for Labor and the nation, and strong human feelings, made him a figure that will never be forgotten”

**J A Ferguson, Federal President of the ALP**

“The only things I hate are want, misery and insecurity of any people in any country”

**Ben Chifley**

“He was a more reliable treasurer than batsmen”

**LF Crisp**

**“You cannot afford to be in the middle of the road. You have to be quite clear about what you believe in, whether popular or unpopular and you have to fight for it”**

**Ben Chifley**

“I do not want to even try and talk about him because although we were political opponents, he was a great friend of mine and all of us, and a fine Australian. Mr Chifley served his country magnificently for years...”

**Prime Minister Robert Menzies**

“the most valuable man in Parliament”

**Prime Minister John Curtin**

“He would say nothing that he did not believe to be true”

**Lithgow Mercury**

“if I think a thing is worth fighting for, no matter what the penalty is, I will fight for the right, and truth and justice will prevail”

**Ben Chifley**



**“Labor stands for the people. Labor stands against all who would take advantage of the people. Labor stands on its achievements not on irresponsible promises”**

**Ben Chifley**



“No political leader had so profoundly affected the domestic life and the future history of our country”

**former NSW Premier  
Neville Wran**

“History, truly written must present Ben Chifley as one of the very greatest Australians”

**Dr HV Evatt Leader of  
the ALP**

“He loved everything and everyone”

**Elizabeth Chifley**

“Ah, boy, when I go no one will care a damn about me”

**Ben Chifley**

**“We must not only desire to win, but we must deserve to win”**

**Ben Chifley**

# Foreword

**Brett Gale**  
**Executive Director Chifley Research**  
**Centre**

It is a sad fact of Australian political life that most speeches delivered by our political leaders aren't remembered for too long after they are spoken.

However, at least one speech does stand out.

Its words continue to echo down through the decades - JB Chifley's "Light on the Hill" speech.

That's why the Chifley Research Centre is pleased to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of Ben Chifley becoming Australia's 16th Prime Minister by producing this volume of essays, "The Light on the Hill", marking the life and legacy of one of Australia's most significant and beloved leaders.

But Ben Chifley is remembered today not just for his most famous speech.

His achievements too resonate through the years.

Full employment, uniform national income tax, welfare state reforms, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, the establishment of Trans-Australian Airlines, the Australian National University, the creation of an Australian car industry.

The boy from Bathurst is remembered for his character and for the accomplishments of the government he led as Prime Minister and the Curtin Government he served in as treasurer.

In this ebooklet we've asked a number of those who've chronicled Chifley's life and work to give their assessments of JB Chifley's legacy, 75 years after he took on the responsibilities of leading Australia through the end days of the Second World War and helping to reconstruct the post-war nation.

Historians David Day, Julie Soares and Stuart McIntyre place the domestic and international policy successes of Chifley (in both his roles as Treasurer and Prime Minister) in a longer term context.

Their reflections on Chifley's post-war achievements are particularly timely as once again Australia begins rebuilding from a time of great economic, social and physical destruction.

Sue Martin, Chifley's Grand Niece, uses family reminiscences and personal anecdotes to highlight the personality and strength of character that led Chifley to have such a lasting policy impact on Australia. And, Ed Husic the Federal Member for the electorate named after Chifley, provides a thoughtful, personal, meditation on how we should view Chifley today from a position of a society that has changed dramatically since 1945.

The history of Australian Labor is the history of Australia. It is Australian Labor that has always been responsible for the great social and economic achievements of the ages – from the creation of Australia's first central bank through to Medicare and more recently the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

One of the key tasks of the Chifley Research Centre, in our role as Australian Labor's Official Think Tank, is to celebrate and commemorate the history of the Australian Labor Party. That's why we maintain our Labor History website [www.laborhistory.org.au](http://www.laborhistory.org.au)

As the peerless Labor speechwriter and historian Graham Freudenberg once wrote, "More than any other political party in the world, the Australian Labor Party reflects and represents the character of the nation which produced it."

And Ben Chifley exemplifies that character more than most.

Train Driver, Unionist, Treasurer, Labor Leader, Prime Minister, Architect of post-war Australia.

Chifley's light on the hill remains an inspiring rallying cry for all who want to see a fairer Australia. Ben Chifley's words and deeds live on as an inspiration to generations.

75 years after becoming Prime Minister, Ben Chifley remains a cherished figure in Australian history, an icon of the Australian Labor Party, and an inspirational example to all.

Chifley Research Centre is proud to be named in his honour and we are proud to celebrate this important anniversary via this commemorative ebooklet.

Hopefully this will be the first of a number of projects and events over the next 18 months to celebrate the history and legacy of this great Australian.

# About Our Authors

## David Day

David has written biographies of John Curtin and Ben Chifley, as well as of Andrew Fisher and Paul Keating. He is presently writing a biography of Bob Hawke.

## Ed Husic

Ed is the Member for Chifley (the electorate named in honor of Ben Chifley) in Australia's Federal Parliament.

## Sue Martin

Sue is the Grand Niece of Ben Chifley and author of "Remembering Ben Chifley: Memories and stories from his family and friends".

## Stuart McIntyre

Stuart is the author of "Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s" and "The History Wars" (with Anna Clark).

## Julie Soares

Julie is author of "JB Chifley: An Ardent Internationalist".



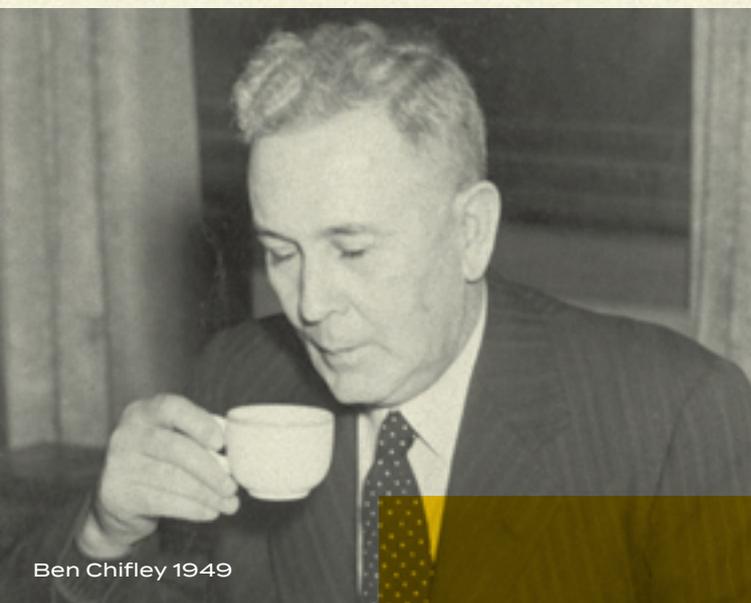
# Ben Chifley: 75 years on

The architect of post-war Australia  
by David Day

During the 1940s, Australia was led by three of its most significant political figures, John Curtin and Ben Chifley from 1941-49, and Robert Menzies at the beginning and end of the decade. It was fortunate for the nation that Menzies lost the confidence of the parliament in 1941, which allowed Curtin to form a minority Labor government that kept Australia safe from invasion and laid the groundwork for a more vibrant, forward-looking and fairer society. It was a tragedy that Curtin didn't live to witness those developments come to fruition under Chifley.

Both men had been in parliament when the Labor government of James Scullin was elected in 1929, only for it to be brought down by the testing times of the Depression, when the interests of ordinary Australians were sold out to the bankers and bondholders of Britain. For the former train driver, Ben Chifley it was an important learning experience, as he watched the burden of the Depression being loaded onto the shoulders of working people and he read of the new economic theories being proposed by J.M. Keynes that could have charted an easier way out of the morass.

It wasn't until after the outbreak of war that the final vestiges of the Depression disappeared, as the government direction of the war economy created full employment for the first time in nearly a century and greatly accelerated the development of secondary industries. And it was Chifley, acting as Treasurer, who had much of the responsibility for these dramatic changes in Australia's national circumstances. The Labor

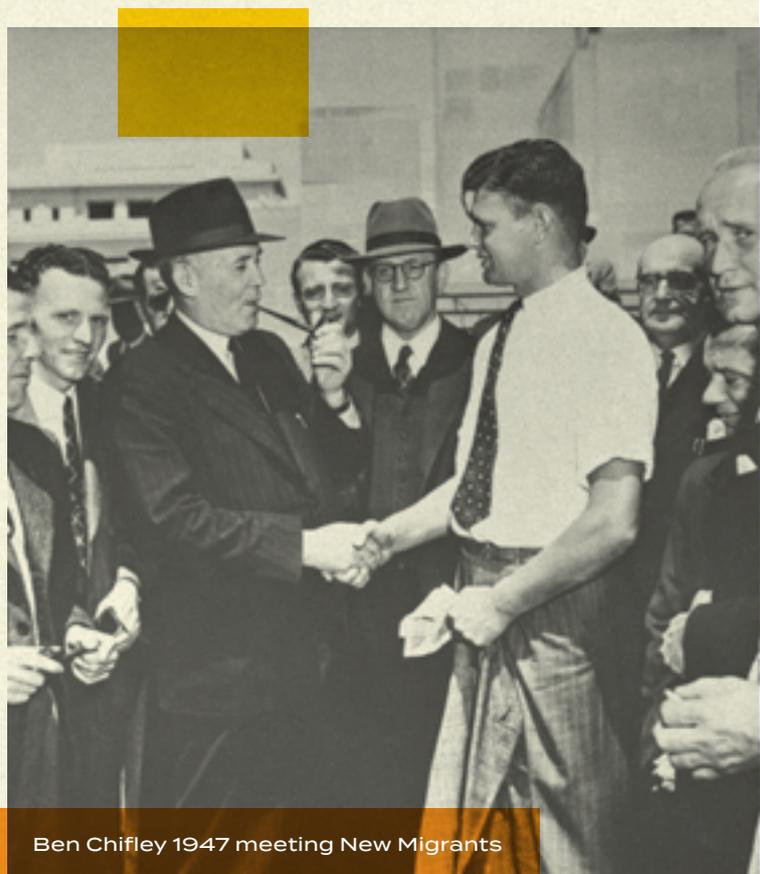


Ben Chifley 1949

government was helped by the continent becoming the base for the American forces that would stem the expansion of the Japanese empire and then act as a launching pad for the subsequent offensives by Allied forces.

The experience of the war posed two clear questions for Curtin and Chifley. Firstly, if government direction and initiative could work so well in war, expunging the lingering effects of the Depression, why could it not also guarantee full employment and increasing prosperity in peace? Secondly, if British defence guarantees had proved practically worthless to Australia in the face of the fast-expanding Japanese forces, how could Australia guarantee its defence in the face of new threats arising in the post-war world? Those questions were beginning to be answered by the time Curtin died in July 1945 and Chifley took his place.

Greatly increasing the Australian population would provide one of the answers. This would be done through encouraging Australians to have children and by embracing a mass immigration program, since natural increase alone could not provide a sufficient population to secure the continent before the next expected threat arose. The Labor Party had always been ambivalent about immigration, which it regarded as a threat to wages and living standards, even if it was immigration from Britain. The idea of non-white immigration,



Ben Chifley 1947 meeting New Migrants

or even immigrants from parts of Europe, was an anathema even to Chifley, whose electoral platform in 1928 had stoked fears of southern European immigrants.

So, it was a radical departure for Chifley, and for Australians in general, when his government declared that it was embarking on a mass immigration program. Long-held fears and prejudices were assuaged by promising that the primary source of the program would be Britain. In the event, that didn't prove possible. Indeed, modern-day Australia might look quite different if sufficient ships had been available in the immediate post-war years to bring the many



Ben Chifley 1948 - with the first Holden

to the developing countries of the region. Hence his encouragement for the local manufacture of motor cars, starting with the Holden.

In Chifley's vision, the new factories wouldn't just be in the cities, but would be encouraged to locate in country towns like Bathurst, where he foresaw them one day being driven by hydro-electricity

Britons who wanted to leave that war-damaged land. By the time they became available, the number of potential British migrants had dwindled, compelling the government to look increasingly to Europe.

Although people such as B.A. Santamaria wanted immigrants to work small farms set around towns and villages, Chifley had a bolder and more modern vision. He'd lived a rude existence on his grandfather's small farm near Bathurst and knew that the future prosperity and security of Australia could not be found in a slab hut. Instead, he wanted to accelerate the transformation of Australia from a mainly rural-based economy that exchanged primary produce for manufactured goods imported from Britain and the United States, to an urban, industrialised economy that exported manufactured goods

from the Snowy Mountains and even atomic power derived from Australian uranium. Of course, this would require a workforce that had progressed beyond the stump-jump plough and steam-driven shears. Hence the creation of the Australian National University in Canberra, with one of its first appointments being the noted nuclear physicist, Mark Oliphant, along with others involved in the study of Asia and the Pacific. It was a vision of a confident and self-reliant nation creating a secure place for itself in a post-imperial region and world.

This didn't mean turning away from its historic ties with Britain, based on its membership of the British Empire, or its new-found friendship with the United States, based on mutual wartime interests. Chifley envisaged Australia moving into the post-war power vacuum created in the South-West Pacific



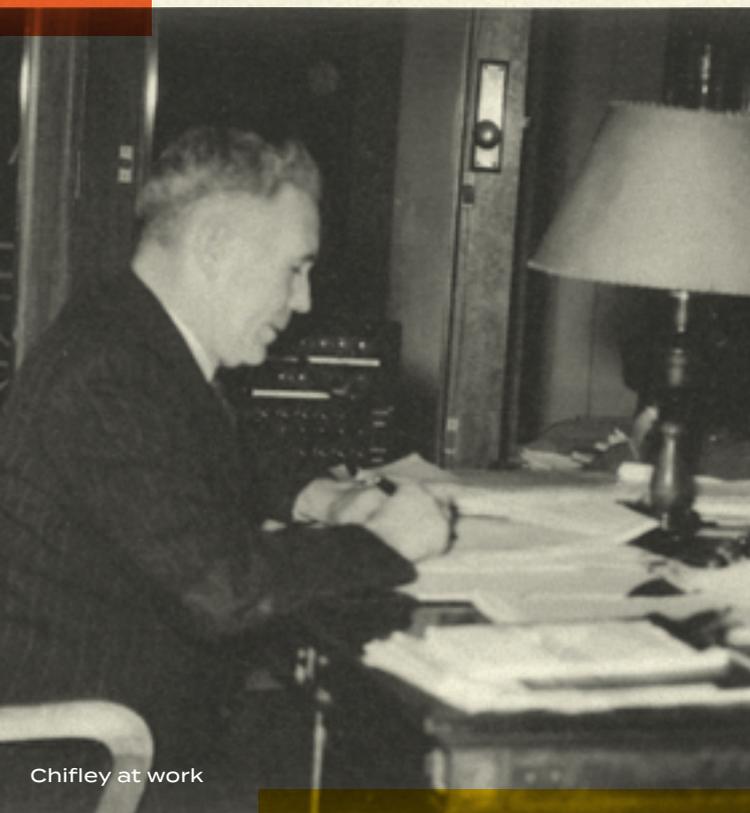
Ben Chifley (fourth from right) and India's Jawaharlal Nehru (far right) with other leaders in London on 21 April 1949 for the Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers.

by the retreat of European empires, confident that Australia could hold sway there, both economically and militarily. Rather than encouraging the return of the old empires, Chifley encouraged the Indonesians fighting for their independence against the Dutch and refused British entreaties to send troops to help them re-establish their control over Malaya.

Instead of being dependent on distant protectors, Chifley planned to make Australia more self-reliant by retaining the core, wartime manufacturing facilities, so that its defence forces could continue to be equipped with aircraft, both four-engine bombers and fighters, as well as ships, guns and munitions, while he also purchased two British aircraft carriers so Australia could extend its power over the immediate region. And he looked to the United Nations to help ensure the peace and to provide Australia with a stronger voice in world affairs, along with other middle powers.

There was a limit to what Chifley and his government could do. He was right that the old world dominated by empires was disappearing, but it was not replaced by a world where middle powers could hold sway or even exert much influence. Instead, it gradually settled into a world divided between the 'West' and the 'East' and characterised by a rivalry so intense that it became known as the Cold War. This effectively extinguished Chifley's vision of a new world order and ended the dream of Australia having independent foreign and defence policies. Domestically, it would help to bring an end to the Chifley government and go on to poison Australian politics for the next thirty or so years.

Like other Labor governments before him and since, Chifley was also limited by the Constitution, which prevented him from regulating the economy along lines that had been possible in wartime. He and Curtin had tried to change it by referendum in 1944, so that



Chifley at work

the government could continue its wartime controls for five years after the war in order to achieve its ambitious reconstruction plans. But the referendum was defeated. A more limited set of referendum questions, put to the people in 1946, only saw one of the three questions approved. The vote gave the government power over social services, which saw Chifley then implement the pharmaceutical benefits scheme, which endures to this day.

There are many other enduring legacies from Chifley's time as Treasurer and then Prime Minister. One is the assumption of income tax powers from the states, which made the federal government the

undisputed power in the nation. Chifley had grown up in the colony of New South Wales, which was in turn a staunch part of the British Empire. He wanted to create a truly national sentiment from the detritus of colonies and the crumbling empire. A national income tax and a national university were just two of the ways he used to achieve that purpose. After his passing of the Australian Nationality Act, passports would henceforth identify their bearers as citizens of Australia and not just subjects of Britain.

The most enduring legacy was the post-war immigration program, which would make modern Australia unrecognisable to the Chifley who had become prime minister on 12 July 1945 and went on to initiate the program. It was his boldest move of all. At a time when Australia is now emerging from another emergency, is mired in an economic recession and is facing the existential challenge posed by global warming, the example of Chifley should inspire Australians to be similarly bold in their aspirations.

# Walking in his shoes

By Ed Husic

While taking my young son on what seemed like our tenth visit to Canberra's Questacon last year, I decided to walk him past a pair of statues capturing a mid stride chat between John Curtin and Ben Chifley.

I was about to explain how one of the men in those statutes inspired the naming of the federal seat that I'm proud to represent, when my son patted Chifley's forearm: "Joseph Benedict Chifley".

I asked how he knew it was Chifley so quickly. "The pipe," he answered matter-of-factly (job well done, ABC's Behind The News "Prime Ministers" series).

As I watched the winter sun warm Chifley's metallic face, I momentarily wondered what he would've thought of me, representing a seat named after him?

If I can confess to you: I'm not actually interested in the answer. I'm not being disrespectful or projecting false modesty. The question is asked for a reason; to help spotlight the evolution of our



The bronze Chifley and Curtin statues, Canberra

party - and the personal journey of those who led it.

Ben Chifley has rightfully earned a special place in Labor history. Not just by virtue of his time as a Prime Minister or achievements secured - but by virtue of the very person that he was.

From his early days he was noticed for his decency and respect of others.

As biographer L.F.Crisp recorded: "it was a very noticeable characteristic with him that he would listen to the views of other people."

As a union official he was "the man who negotiated a beneficial settlement or a constructive compromise with firmness and tenacity softened by a certain sweet reasonableness."

Fellow parliamentarians, such as Labor MP Eddie Ward, would vouch emphatically about his honour: "If he gives his word, that's the end of it. You don't need it in writing. You needn't worry about it any more."

You might've forgiven Chifley a bit if it had turned out that that virtuosity

had dimmed somewhat as a result of the ample quota of political failure he'd experienced in early adulthood.

Or if he had been embittered by both participation in - and the unfair aftermath of - the Great Strike of 1917.

Those formative years provided many hard knocks. In 1922 and 1924 he repeatedly failed to secure party preselection. In 1925 he missed out on his first attempt as a Labor candidate for a federal seat. He wasn't the "insider's insider", success wasn't gifted to him.

He fought hard for what he got and he got it - winning a spot in 1928 to become part of a Scullin Labor Government, a government which then went on to be overwhelmed by a ghastly economic depression and split asunder by differences fueled via conflicts with NSW Labor leader Jack Lang.

After finally scrambling over preselection hurdles, came the campaigning - and that wasn't any easier.

The federal seat Chifley pursued - Macquarie, now held by that dynamo Susan Templeman - was expansive. It stretched roughly 160kms from Bathurst to St Marys (St Marys itself has at various stages sat within the electorate eventually named after Chifley himself).

It contained notoriously tricky electoral terrain for Labor. Crisp recorded that the candidate "carried out a personal canvass, often walking from door to door in and around Windsor, Richmond and Penrith."

Apart from the time St Marys sat in Chifley's old seat, the man himself campaigned on occasion in areas such as Mount Druitt, a suburb embedded now as the heart of the current Chifley electorate.

I mention all this because I've been conscious of the past footsteps taken in our patch of western Sydney by a younger, aspiring political candidate in Chifley.

And distinct from physical markers, I've wondered about the influence of decisions taken by Chifley as an older, established parliamentarian.

For instance, my dad made it to Australia from the former Yugoslavia in the late 1960s, responding to our nation's call for skilled blue-collar workers. Mum joined him a few years later (and in my early years we lived in Blacktown - a suburb then the centre of a new seat created in 1969, called... Chifley).

The need for a large-scale immigration program emerged with the sketching out of reconstruction plans conceived by the Curtin government at the closing stages of World War II, driven largely by Chifley.



Chifley meeting new migrants 1947

And as a welder and boilermaker one of the first projects dad worked on was on the Chifley-initiated Snowy Mountains scheme.

As I learned more through the years about Chifley and layered over experiences and time sequences, it wasn't hard to detect the way Australia's 16th Prime Minister indirectly shaped the fortunes of our family and my current lived experience.

Having shared that with you, I do need to draw you back to my earlier question: how would Ben Chifley feel about the son of an immigrant representing a seat named after him?

The question lodged itself in my mind as I recounted some of Chifley's nail-biting electoral experiences.

Remember, Chifley hadn't experienced the best of runs, losing two preselections then coming up short in his first tilt at Macquarie in 1925. At that election, the conservative Bruce Government had wrongly (but potently) hung around Labor's neck an association with communism to repel away voter support.



By the time Chifley was back for another crack at Macquarie in 1928 he and his fellow Labor candidates had to once again confront a re-heated serve of conservative scare-mongering around communism, but this time spiced with industrial relations reforms aimed at provoking a union backlash. Those reforms married up with a conservative NSW government determination to cut the state's basic wage.

But "there was another issue working in Labor's favour", observed Chifley biographer David Day: the issue was foreign labour:

“Australia had found itself the destination of an increasing number of such immigrants. To the consternation of trade unions, most of them were single men and were used to break down the wages and conditions of Australian workers at a time when unemployment was increasing.”

While Chifley biographer Crisp makes light mention of soon to be Prime Minister Scullin’s “heavy attacks on... its (Bruce Government’s) sustained pouring of Southern European migrants on the saturated Australian labour market”, Day details the length to which both Scullin and Chifley made this a campaign theme.

Day records how, speaking in Bathurst that year, Scullin passionately declared Labor’s

commitment to “the maintenance and establishment of Australian industries and the employment of our own workmen in our own country”.

Chifley would go on to tell other rallies about the need to clamp down on those foreign workers “being used to break down the wages and conditions of Australian workmen.” Specifically, Chifley:

“...cited the case of ‘Jugo-Slovakians [sic]’ in the Bathurst district who had displaced Australian workers by agreeing to work longer hours at lower rates of pay.”

At a 12 November meeting, Chifley excoriated the government for giving “preference to Dagoes - not heroes”.



Curtin Government after Swearing In, October 1941

It's hard going digesting those comments, especially for the child of "Jugo-Slovakians". How do we interpret them today?

**Importantly too, as much as Chifley was a man of his times we should recognise how he altered with the times.**

I'd argue we should remember, not airbrush, them. Sure, Chifley was a man of his times. As much as he made great and important decisions, we can also be brave enough to call out the choices he didn't get right.

(Mind you, the Liberals have never hesitated glorifying the history of Sir Robert Menzies, who embarrassingly earned the nickname "Pig Iron Bob").

Importantly too, as much as Chifley was a man of his times we should recognise how he altered with the times.

While we can celebrate the way a later Labor lion in Whitlam reduced

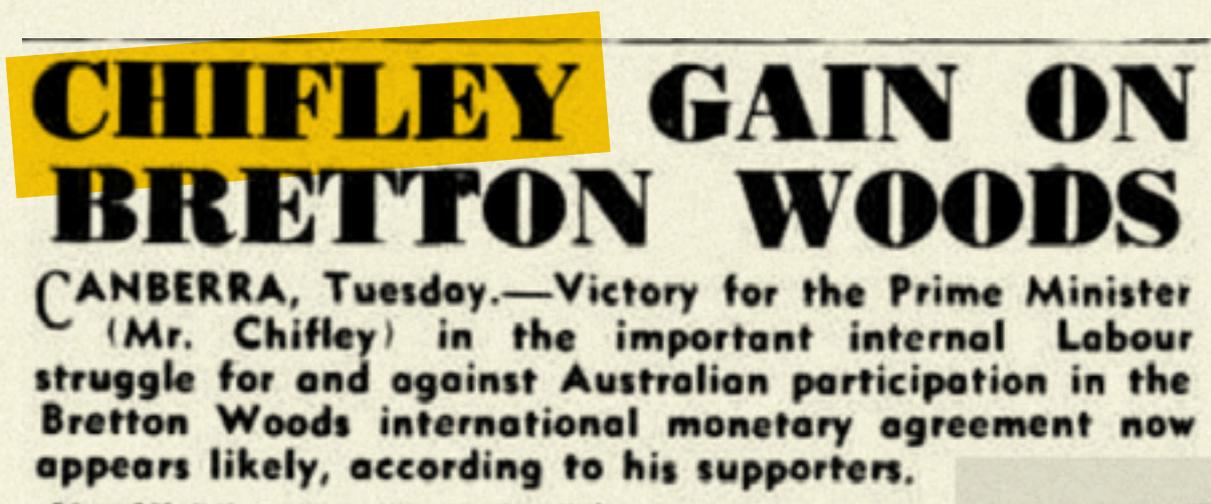
to dust the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy, it should also not be forgotten that Chifley had to move beyond objections to "foreign labour".

Having said that I am not ascribing too much by way of a Chifley recant, there's little evidence of that. But the path to rebuilding a nation emaciated by war, did prompt a rethink about how things could be done.

While their daily preoccupation centred on doing what could be done to prevent invasion and contribute to a successful closure to hostilities, both Curtin and Chifley were prodded by federal party conferences to dedicate greater thought as to how a post-war Australia would be rebuilt.

In 1942 Curtin appoints Chifley to the newly created position of "Minister for Post-War Reconstruction" (a move not without objection, given some thought Chifley already had enough on his plate as a wartime Treasurer).

Once the architecture was put in place to start developing the longer



term approach to reconstruction - including the placement of 35 year old Herbert Cole Coombs to a central role - Chifley began to spell out the likely shape of reconstruction, that according to Crisp, was centred on “full employment, social security and Australia’s international economy policy.”

They begin to develop a white paper to promote Full Employment in Australia.

They reveal plans for a National Welfare Fund financed from progressive taxation, bringing with it a broad sweep of new payments that would string together the threads of a comprehensive post-war safety net.

They realise Australia’s future living standards will rely on satisfying high

international demand via exports, trade opportunities the nation would need to prepare for. In time our automotive manufacturing capabilities are established, the wool industry is shaped up for post-war trade.

There was also an understanding that Australia’s future prosperity would demand active engagement by its leaders in the international effort to hammer together crucial post-war institutional frameworks, starting with the negotiation of the Bretton Woods Agreement.

But importantly - for those mouths that once sprouted warnings about the impact of foreign labour on jobs, the same (much older) ears heard in Prime Minister Curtin’s 1943 declaration: “Australia cannot expect to hold indefinitely this large continent with the small population

it now possesses.”

A declaration which no doubt prompted Chifley to suddenly become a “keen exponent” of large scale migration as early as 1944, notes Crisp.

The times demanded a rethink. Circumstance prompted new approaches.

As always, Labor evolved - reflecting personal journeys of leaders. Reforms and programs set in place that played a pivotal role setting foundations from which Australia’s post-war prosperity would be built.

By the time a shattered and grieving Chifley was talked into the leadership following the death in 1945 of his friend and Prime Minister John Curtin, much of the government’s future trajectory had been set.

That’s not to say that from there it was a smooth ride. Hardly so.

Growing public impatience with rationing. Drought. Balance of Payments crises. An ongoing arm wrestle against inflation. A bitter struggle against the emergence of communism on Australian shores. Disputes with unions, broken

**In time, Labor re-charted its direction. We took bolder, firmer steps to tackle discrimination, finally ending the White Australia Policy, championing multiculturalism, advancing land rights reform and reconciliation with First Nations’ people.**

by calling in the military. These episodes lay ahead.

At the time of his election as leader though, Chifley enjoyed widespread support. “I did not want this and I don’t think I have any special talents for it,” he said gruffly (in a voice likened once to the sound of a nail scraping a can).

“The only reason I think I’m here is that when I was Treasurer there were

two doors always open and anybody at any time could drop in and talk things over,” he figures.

Yet I come back to the place of race in those early campaigns. Should it stand in the way of us recognising and respecting what Chifley was able to achieve? Should it diminish or dim our respect of him? To be fair to past generations, who’s to say that the decisions I made with a generation of politicians today will not be challenged by the next?

While putting into perspective elements of the early Chifley’s campaign rhetoric - pitting Europeans against British descendents - we cannot brush away what was said.

I don’t think I’m being too tough bringing this focus to bear on Chifley simply because the early years of our nation were scarred by painful instances where intemperate words about race led to sticks and stones being used to break bones.

The reality is our party has had to confront past realities, the tensions with race that gripped us in our infancy. Chifley was a generational product of that tradition. And in

his typically pragmatic way - by opening the door for large scale migration - he took the steps to walk past those sharp words once flung out of the mouth of a fledgling political candidate, nearly two decades earlier.

In time, Labor re-charted its direction. We took bolder, firmer steps to tackle discrimination, finally ending the White Australia Policy, championing multiculturalism, advancing land rights reform and reconciliation with First Nations’ people.

As we admire those statues of Chifley and Curtin, we see the light and the shade that is cast. And we in good faith admit that few of us are in a position to pick out the imperfections of others, without first acknowledging our own.

# A Sacred Trust

By Sue Martin

On July 13th this year it will be 75 years since Ben Chifley became Australia's 16th Prime Minister after serving as Treasurer in John Curtin's war time government.

Curtin had died on July 5th, while the war in the Pacific was still in progress, after having finished in Europe in May. Ben was just too upset to attend his friend John Curtin's funeral and he certainly did not want the job of PM.

He told his family at the time that some in the party want him to nominate for "the bloody suicide squad" (Quote from nephew John Chifley) and he had no intention of doing that since there were other people who might actually want the job.

His wife Elizabeth also thought he was working too hard and wanted

him home to rest. It wasn't until he was told by James Scullin that it had been the wish of John Curtin for Ben to lead the party, that he agreed to nominate.

**It wasn't until he was told by James Scullin that it had been the wish of John Curtin for Ben to lead the party, that he agreed to nominate.**

On becoming Prime Minister Ben said, "I regard my election as a sacred trust to carry on the traditions of Jack Curtin who believed this country had one paramount duty-- to win the war irrespective of other sacrifices." In that spirit he carried on through the closing days of the war.

Just a month before in June, Ben had been successful in being made

a Privy Counsellor by King George after having been nominated by John Curtin for the extremely long hours he was putting into the war effort.

In a break with tradition, when he was in England later for the ceremony, he would not wear the ceremonial court uniform and breeches required and instead wore his ordinary serge suit with his white shirt and tie.

Later, on another occasion he turned down a banquet invitation to Buckingham Palace with the King saying that he did not have a proper dinner suit with tails and was not going to buy something he did not need. He would not hire or borrow one either. King George who was very understanding of Australians and their egalitarianism told him to wear his ordinary lounge suit and he would do the same.

Everyone else, however, including other Commonwealth Prime Ministers were in their formal dinner suits. Ben also refused a Knighthood from the King, believing that if he was called Sir Joseph Chifley it would be against all the

principles of equality he had work hard to bring about during his life.

He also turned down the Freedom to the city of London but stood with tears in his eyes when he was given the keys to the city of Bathurst, his hometown.

Ben Chifley's government enacted a record 229 bills from 1946 -49 as it introduced its policy of reforms and rebuilding post war Australia. Chifley embarked on an ambitious nation building scheme for Australia and enlisted the help of the best minds in the country and sometimes overseas to help achieve it.



27 August 1949 the day CHifley was made the Second Free Man of Bathurst

His goal was a debt free Australia with full employment and economic stability with housing for all. By 1948 the country had achieved full employment even with the tens of thousands of service men and women returning from war service to rejoin the workforce.

He set up scholarship and educational opportunities for all ex-servicemen and increased existing benefits and pensions as well as introducing new ones, including widows pensions, family allowances, students benefits, maternity allowances, unemployment and sickness benefits.

The Chifley government significantly increased old age and disability

pensions and tried unsuccessfully to establish a free national health service for everyone, but failed to do so due to opposition from the doctors. He did, however, manage to enact the hospital Subsidy Scheme which made all public ward beds free as well as the Pharmaceutical Benefits scheme which provided cheaper medicine for all. His work with the Bathurst District hospital had shown him the great need for it.

Tertiary education was expanded through funding of Commonwealth scholarships and educational training. The Australian National University was established and grants to tertiary institutions expanded plus the Australian University Act provided post graduate facilities to enable staff to further their education.

An ambitious postwar immigration scheme was set up under the capable hands of Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was established and TAA and Qantas were made public airlines. The CSIRO was expanded and reorganised and the Coal Industry Tribunal bought significant gains to working conditions, while the life assurance



Ben Chifley, Prime Minister of Australia, accompanied by ANU architect Professor Brian Lewis, lays the foundation stone of the John Curtin School of Medical Research



Ben Chifley and H.V. Evatt 1940s

industry was comprehensively regulated.

Housing schemes became a national priority while programs to market surplus wool, dairy and all primary products were put in place by stabilising returns from exports.

Private industry benefited from Chifley's support through provision of finance, resource and plant equipment allocated at cheap rates. Latest technology, machinery and equipment was bought from Europe after the war often along with their industry experts to teach and implement the new technology.

Chifley was particularly proud of his achievement in sponsoring GMH to produce an Australian car, the Holden. Other areas to receive

his patronage included grants to brass band and organising to bring masses of tulip bulbs from overseas to plant around Parliament House. This eventually evolved into the present day 'Floriade'

Under the Chifley government Australia came into its own as a country especially in its foreign affairs policies which did not always line up with what Britain and the United States wanted. Ben was determined to make sure Australia played its part in building a world where lasting peace was a possibility.

Recognising that the world order had changed he fully supported Dr Evatt and his work with the United Nations and on every occasion supported smaller nations in their

right for self determination and independence. He played a pivotal role in India's negotiations for independence and refused to send troops to quell the insurrection in Malaya or Indonesia. In the politically charged debate over a Jewish State, Australia went against British

**Ben was determined to make sure Australia played it's part in building a world where lasting peace was a possibility.**

interests and was the first country to vote in support of a Jewish homeland.

Ben believed it was the responsibility of Australia and Western nations to help improve conditions and standards of living in those countries who needed it and would be susceptible to the growth of Communism.

He also advocated that Australia must help Japan find an economic place after the war to avoid another war even though countless Australians had suffered at the hands of Japanese.

Ben died in 1951, and more than 40,000 people packed into Bathurst, then a town of only 12,000. Mourners lined the street ten deep all the way to the cemetery. His state funeral was led by three large military trucks full of flowers and 20 police motorcycles.

Flags were flown at half mast, while the Bathurst carillon played sacred music during the day, sporting fixtures were cancelled and shops closed as the town came to a virtual standstill.

Two extra specially scheduled trains came from Sydney packed full of mourners and special police squads were stationed on duty all along the 130 mile road trip from Sydney. Nine chartered planes carrying over 3,000 people arrived as well as hundreds of buses and more than 2,000 private cars full of people coming for the funeral.

Former NSW member of parliament Gerard Martin was told by his mother that people were crying because "Mr Chifley died and everyone loved Mr Chifley." As his wife Elizabeth said to the family after his death, "Ben loved everything and everyone."

# Ben Chifley leads post-war Australia

by Stuart McIntyre

During the first week of July 1945, with Germany defeated and the war in the Pacific six weeks from conclusion, John Curtin lay dying in the Lodge. Among friends and politicians who came to pay their respects was Ben Chifley, his closest colleague. A journalist reported that when Chifley emerged from his last visit his face was iron grey.

For the past three months Chifley had performed the Prime Minister's duties in addition to his own heavy load as Treasurer, an unusual arrangement since Frank Forde, the Deputy Prime Minister, would normally be expected to take over. It was Curtin's decision to pass Forde over, smoothed by sending him to the conference at San Francisco that created the United Nations.

Even so, Forde was sworn into office on 6 July when Curtin died and

had reason to hope he might hold it. After all, he had lost to Curtin by just a single vote when Caucus last chose a leader.

There were four candidates on 12 July: Forde, Chifley, Bert Evatt, the thrusting Minister for External Affairs, and another lacklustre minister. Chifley had serious doubts about standing: his health was not good and he had seen how the strains of office killed Curtin. Besides, he was a notoriously poor public speaker.

His colleagues had no such doubts. Ever since he had taken charge of the government in April, Chifley displayed a capacity to consult along with a willingness to make decisions and a sure grasp of the decisions that needed to be made. He won a decisive majority, by 45 votes to Forde's 15, with a handful for the other two candidates.

While Chifley had been active in the labour movement for almost forty years, no-one expected him to lead his country. He had been in the political wilderness for much of the 1930s, expelled from his union and the New South Wales branch of the Labor Party for sticking to Jim Scullin over the policy failures of the Depression. He was a moderate and a seeker of consensus who preferred practical reform to confrontation at a time when hardship favoured desperate measures.

Nor did he begin with any advantages. Chifley was born in Bathurst in 1885, the eldest son of a blacksmith who lived between the ages of 5 and 14 with his grandfather on a small farm in the district. Together with the demands of his grandfather ('an old Tartar'), the closure of the local school condemned him to the most rudimentary education.

To overcome this disadvantage he studied at night class, later making use of the Workers Educational Association and Railway Institute. He read widely, though with little interest in the tracts that converted others to socialism. Self-education gave him little chance to develop



Ben Chifley 1930

fluency. To the end of his life he mispronounced words he had read but not heard.

His political awakening came with the formation of the Labor Party. An engine cleaner who made his way up the ranks to fireman and then driver, he was active in the local branch of his union. He opposed military conscription for the Great War and was prominent in the strike of 1917 that spread from the rail and tram workshops in Sydney. And he paid a heavy price, losing his job and reinstated only with the loss of seniority.

This setback only increased his determination. He stepped up his local involvement, becoming a director of the local labour

newspaper, a member of the board of Bathurst's hospital and later a local government representative. In 1925 he launched his first bid for endorsement for the federal seat of Macquarie, succeeded three years later and won the subsequent election.

He was unlucky in his timing. A government that celebrated winning office by singing the Red Flag succumbed to division, demoralisation and defeat. Losing his seat in the general election of 1931, Chifley did not win it back for a decade.

There was no parliamentary pension at that time but the death of Chifley's father-in-law made him financially independent so that he was able to devote himself to public life. It was probably Scullin who persuaded him to become the president of the state branch of the Labor Party, more precisely the one the Federal Executive established to fight Jack Lang who had turned the one he controlled against Federal Labor.

Since Lang's party controlled most of the unions, Labor's newspaper

and radio station, the one over which Chifley presided struggled. It attracted just 10 per cent of the vote in 1934 and failed to win a single seat. The effects were felt nationally. Without improving its performance in the most populous state, Labor could not hope to regain office.

Chifley therefore persisted, even contesting Lang's own Sydney seat in the state parliament. He spoke over hostile crowds so often that he damaged his throat and to the end of his life spoke with a rasping voice. He even suffered the indignity of surrendering his place on the Federal Executive to Lang in 1936 as part of an effort to heal the breach. Not until 1939 did Federal Labor finally prevail.

There were, however, signs of political development. From 1935 he was the Labor representative on a royal commission into banking and seized the opportunity to acquire a deep understanding of the financial system as well as the new theories of Keynes. He was assisted here by another member of the commission, Richard Mills, the professor of economics at Sydney whom Chifley made his 'personal tutor'.



Anti Bank nationalisation protest 1949

His minority report argued that banking should be for the public benefit and not profit, but he also absorbed the majority argument that the government should use central banking powers to control the money supply. Even before Chifley returned to parliament, his talents were recognised by appointment as director of labour relations in the Department of Munitions as it responded to the outbreak of war.

In forming a minority Labor government in 1941, Curtin had to deal with a lack of ministerial talent. His solution was to take charge of the country's defence measures, leaving Chifley as treasurer to organise the war economy. It was a very effective division of labour. Australia was rapidly placed on

a war footing, with far-reaching controls to mobilise and allocate all available resources – labour, capital, resources, along with wages, prices, profits and consumption.

In devising these arrangements Chifley drew on the services of economists. Most were new to public administration, many still young, and Chifley encouraged them to present their ideas. Such advice had to be pitted, however, against senior Treasury officials, deeply traditional, whose parsimony accorded with Chifley's own frugal instincts.

Since 1939 Curtin had called for an ambitious program of reconstruction that would eradicate the hardship and insecurity that gave rise to the war. Upon assuming office just two months before Japan struck in 1941, he wanted no distraction from the fight for national survival, so that reconstruction became a post-war project that would repay the people for their sacrifice. To this end he waited until the end of 1942 to establish a Department of Post-War Reconstruction and put it under Chifley to restrain expectations.



The Department thus began with a strictly limited set of objectives: to ensure full employment, provide economic and social security, and lift living standards. But Chifley also entered into an extraordinarily fruitful partnership with his Director-General, H.C. 'Nugget Coombs', so that reconstruction expanded to take in the modernisation of manufacturing and farming, an ambitious program of public housing, town and regional planning, education, social welfare, a national health system, repatriation and rehabilitation, mass immigration and much else.

Chifley gave up responsibility for reconstruction when he became prime minister but continued to oversee its implementation and won

a decisive electoral mandate for it in 1946. The plans were impeded by a number of forces beyond his control: acute shortages of labour and materials, obstruction from employers and a deterioration of relations with the unions, a growing weariness with controls and the onset of the Cold War.

But he held office until the end of 1949 and effected a remarkable transformation of the role of government and the meaning of citizenship, inaugurating a quarter-century of rising living standards and a fairer distribution of wealth. As we approach the seventy-fifth anniversary of his commencing this transformation, we should pay tribute to a remarkable Australian.

# Chifley the Internationalist

by Julie Soares

Ben Chifley was given the portfolio of treasurer after the Fadden conservative government fell and the Curtin Labor government took office on 7 October 1941.<sup>1</sup> After the death of prime minister John Curtin on 5 July 1945, Chifley became prime minister on 13 July.<sup>2</sup> He served as prime minister and treasurer until December 1949 and was leader of the Opposition from 1949 until his death in 1951.

Chifley, the ex-train driver, was a 'leader loved for his compelling modesty and authenticity'.<sup>3</sup> In this era of narcissistic and isolationist leaders, who reject international collaboration and institutions, engaging in trade wars that hark back to the 1930s, Chifley—in the post-war period—was quite remarkable in his commitment to internationalism. For Chifley, the 1930s was 'an epoch of chaos', a period of 'economic warfare that

did incalculable harm to trade and went far to cause the armed conflict of 1939'.<sup>4</sup> He argued: 'Of all the dangers that beset international relationships the greatest is the illusion that any country ... can stand apart in isolation'.<sup>5</sup>

Ben Chifley's legacy in the domestic and the international spheres was substantial. As treasurer and prime minister, he initiated many innovative nation-building policies, establishing a strong social security system and other reforms—still in place today—that led to many years of prosperity for Australia. Similarly, the bold and radical policies the Chifley government pursued in foreign policy and his backing of organisations such as the United Nations, meant that his government made decisions in support of its Asian neighbours that previous and subsequent Australian prime ministers and governments would have found unimaginable.<sup>6</sup>



Ben Chifley and HC Coombs 1946 in London

Chifley's sense of 'the emergent future which was ever in his mind'<sup>7</sup> meant that his government supported the Indonesian Republic in its struggle to win independence from the Dutch. As he said in parliament, 'in the long view—looking 40 or 50 years ahead', it was 'essential' that friendly relations were developed between the peoples of Australia and Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> His government also supported independence for India in 1947.

Public servant Harold Breen, who worked closely with Chifley, wrote that he worked tirelessly, 'toiling

from early morning until midnight and after'. He noted:

There was not an activity in Australia in those post-war years in which he was not interested or was not the driving force or the initiator; and often it was all three. Nor was his interest confined to Australia; it roamed over the world: Asia, Europe, America. He received from these places a steady stream of information—official and otherwise—which he absorbed and pondered upon and used.<sup>9</sup>

Chifley was an internationalist. As he said in parliament, he was an 'ardent advocate of all international organizations' because he believed that through them, 'we are engaging in a great human experiment, which is designed to prevent the catastrophes that result from wars and financial and economic depressions'<sup>10</sup>. The interdependence of the countries of the world was very real to him. In 1947, against fierce opposition from his own party, Chifley was able to achieve ratification of the Bretton Woods Agreement, through which Australia became part of the new international financial and monetary system, which Chifley had long advocated.<sup>11</sup>

Chifley's internationalism had a very definite economic aspect. He believed that economic stability needed to be established after World War II so that future generations could be assured of prosperity for all.<sup>12</sup> This could only be achieved by collaboration in international organisations and 'adherence to universal laws and institutions instead of the crude exercise of power relations'.<sup>13</sup>

Chifley understood that no nation was self-sufficient or isolated; instead, nations were part of an international society and economy. For Chifley, ex-enemy countries needed to become prosperous again. Reconstruction, rather than retribution, was required. Although it was a 'difficult' issue to support, he had always advocated that 'victorious nations should immediately commence the task of building up the economic strength' of ex-enemy countries.<sup>14</sup>

Chifley had a deep understanding of the radical changes occurring in post-war Asia and was a key architect of the Australian government's bold new approach to a decolonising Asia. The Chifley government's support of the



Parliament May 1950

Indonesian Republic and India were all radical policy decisions, opposed by the Menzies Opposition and most of the Australian media. In October 1945, Chifley told journalists that information the Commonwealth had gained regarding Indonesia,

indicated that the spirit of revolt against the Dutch was very deep seated and enthusiastic. It was a real independence movement but so far as he was aware there was no communist inspiration behind it.<sup>15</sup>

One of Chifley's most important legacies in international relations was his concept that politicians had to look to the future and plan for the future. As Chifley told the federal conference of the Australian Labor Party, the West had to confront

the fact that 'the people of Asia no longer want white government'.<sup>16</sup> The Chifley government had therefore, supported the Indonesian nationalists in their struggle against the Netherlands' brutal attempts, in July 1947 and December 1948, to regain their resource-rich former colony.<sup>17</sup>

In 1947, Australia, together with India, supported the Republic by referring the conflict to the United Nations Security Council. This was the start of a combined effort by 'two smaller powers, Australia and India', to rally the United Nations in support of the 'beleaguered Indonesian Republic'.<sup>18</sup> In late December 1948, the Dutch unleashed a second military offensive against the Indonesian Republic. Chifley acted swiftly, issuing a press statement that condemned the Dutch<sup>19</sup> and Australia charged the Netherlands with carrying out the first outright violation of the United Nations Charter.<sup>20</sup>

Chifley's support for the Indonesian republicans was vehemently opposed by Robert Menzies, leader of the Opposition. The government's actions were criticised by Menzies

as the 'very ecstasy of suicide', that Australia, 'a country isolated in the world, with a handful of people, a white man's country' – should take sides against a former Dutch ally.<sup>21</sup> The Australian media, also accused the government of 'Cold Shouldering An Ally'.<sup>22</sup> The prime minister, however, withstood pressure from both the media and the Opposition to reverse his decision. Unless there was evidence that the Dutch were willing to accommodate the republic, Chifley said he would not attempt to persuade the Indonesians to accept 'unreasonable' Dutch demands. This would 'widen the gulf between Eastern and Western countries in this area which throughout these negotiations we have persistently endeavoured to bridge'.<sup>23</sup>

Chifley was extremely critical of politicians who regularly sent young men to war. He accused members of the Menzies Opposition of blithely suggesting force could solve any problem. He advised politicians to consider the catastrophic impact of a third world war with the 'new forms of warfare' now in use. His government had worked hard to bring the nations of the world



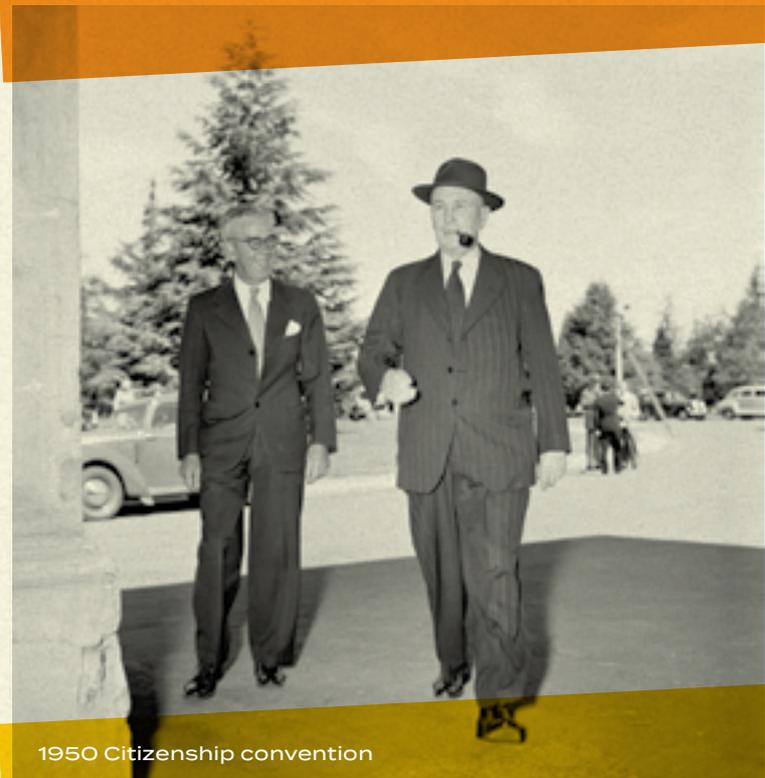
India's prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (seated, second from left) and Australia's Ben Chifley (seated, far right) with other Commonwealth leaders and spouses at 10 Downing Street, London, in April 1949

together to encourage peace. This was done, Chifley declared, not for the sake of politicians, 'who merely make speeches, but for the boys who have to go out and die for their country'. Chifley believed there was 'too much talk by people who themselves are not likely to be killed which encourages warfare and killing'. He added, 'every human being who had any love of the human race should try to achieve unity and understanding among the nations of the world'.<sup>24</sup>

Another important test of how the Chifley government would respond to the unraveling of European colonialism in Asia, was the emergence of an independent India.<sup>25</sup> British imperial rule was ending after years of struggle for political independence by Indian nationalists led by Jawaharlal Nehru who had spent over ten years in British gaols. In 1947, the Chifley government backed independence for India. A great admirer of Nehru, Chifley 'warmed to the charm and the swift, shrewd wit of the man'.<sup>26</sup> He quoted him extensively in his

speeches in parliament. He said many times that Nehru was 'the most powerful figure in Asian politics, and, indeed, in the Asian world'.<sup>27</sup>

Australia's engagement with the Indonesian nationalists' campaign for independence also reveals the Chifley government's commitment to the United Nations as an international organisation facilitating peace and security in the post-war world. As historian David Lee notes, the 'involvement of the Security Council in Indonesian independence, involvement that was instigated and strongly supported by Australia, led to one of its earliest and most emphatic successes'. Thus, instead of 'prolonged military conflict, as occurred in France's colonies in Indochina', the Security Council's involvement in negotiations in this



1950 Citizenship convention

conflict resulted in the 'birth of an independent Indonesian state'.<sup>28</sup> This is another significant example of prime minister Ben Chifley's legacy in the history of Australian foreign policy.

## Endnotes from Julie Soares

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