

Chapter 9

20th Century Political Rhetoric: Churchill, Menzies and Whitlam

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A tendentious link

In linking together Winston Churchill, Robert Menzies and Gough Whitlam, I do not mean to suggest that there is a kind of apostolic succession between them, or that the subject of this contribution is: "Orators I have known".

We tend to forget, now, that well over half of Whitlam's parliamentary career of the 13 years from his election to the federal parliament in 1952 to Menzies' retirement in 1966, was contemporary with Menzies in his prime; and that Whitlam was deputy leader of the federal Parliamentary Labor Party for more than five years, nearly a third of Menzies' second Prime Ministership. So there is this connection. After all, it was Whitlam who wrote to Menzies on becoming Prime Minister in December 1972:

You might be surprised to know how much I have benefited from your example in leading your party from disaster to victory in two terms.¹

There is a further connection. For my own part, I can, I suppose, claim to be the only living Australian to have seen Churchill in the flesh in the House of Commons, to have been patted on the cheek by Bob Menzies, and touched on the shoulder for luck by Gough Whitlam.

In respect of the first, I was in London in 1956 at the time of the Suez Crisis. I was in the Gallery of the House of Commons when Churchill, a year after his too-long delayed retirement from his second Prime Ministership, toddled into the House to witness, like me, the closing act in the history of the fall of the British Empire.

In respect of the second, in 1959, I was doing a three-year stint as a news journalist on Melbourne's Channel 9, a couple of years before I

¹ See G Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975* (Melbourne: Viking, 1985) at 1.

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