

# MENZIES AND CHURCHILL AT WAR - AS TOLD BY AUNTY

**S**tarring: Judith Brett, Kim Dalton, David Day, Mark Hamlyn, Gerard Henderson, John Howard, Rod Kemp, Stuart Menzies, John Moore, Mark Scott and many more (including Film Victoria and Screen Australia)

**“It’s going to be a dramatic increase. And we think it’s very important, particularly as the media industry is under so much pressure. Drama is so expensive to do. We think: Who will tell the Australian story? And we think the ABC is well conditioned to do that.”**

- Mark Scott, ABC managing director, commenting on the extra funding for the public broadcaster announced by Treasurer Wayne Swan at the Budget on 12 May 2009.

The ABC did very well indeed out of the 2009 Federal Budget, especially in light of the impact of the Global Financial Crisis – including an extra \$70 million for drama over the next three years. Clearly Kevin Rudd’s Labor government looks kindly on the main public broadcaster. The ABC also did relatively well out of John Howard’s Coalition government – despite the fact that Howard and some of his ministers were public critics of the public broadcaster.

## **THE LIBERALS FUND THEIR CRITICS - AGAIN**

The 2005 Federal Budget contained a special provision for the ABC. Senator Rod Kemp, then Minister for Arts and Sport, announced that “Film Australia will receive an additional \$7.5 million over three years to produce a 10-part series of high quality documentaries on Australian history”. The idea was that Film Australia (which was re-vamped into Screen Australia on 1 July 2008) would receive funding for documentaries which would be commissioned by, and shown on, the ABC. The ABC paid a relatively



small amount to Screen Australia for screening rights and the ABC is currently selling copies of the DVDs of these documentaries.

The Liberal Party has a record of financing its critics. So it came as no surprise when part of the \$7.5 million, so proudly announced by Rod Kemp in May 2005, found its way to a documentary based on a book by a left-wing academic, starring a left-of-centre commentator and directed by a leftist documentary producer. And now to the story of *Menzies & Churchill At War* – as told on the taxpayer funded public broadcaster – which was produced by John Moore at 360 Degree Films in Melbourne.

## DAVID DAY AND JUDITH BRETT

David Day is a fine historian. He also happens to be a labour historian. Meaning that he invariably writes on the labour movement – the Australian Labor Party, ALP identities, left-of-centre trade unions and left-wing intellectuals – from a favourable perspective. Labor historians are invariably critical of the Coalition – the Liberal Party and the National Party and their leaders – as well as of political conservatives generally.

Judith Brett is a fine political scientist. She also happens to have a leftist background and was once co-editor (along with Guy Rundle) of the Marxist magazine of self-proclaimed “left political, social and cultural commentary” *Arena Magazine*. Dr Brett is perhaps best known for her book *Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People*. At Page 86 of the first edition, Brett associated Menzies’ anti-communist rhetoric with homophobic bodily imagery – namely, “the imagery of sickness and disease (a social cancer) and the anal erotic imagery of the attack from behind (rooting rats out of holes”).

In *Robert Menzies A Life: Volume 1 1894-1943*, Allan Martin was highly critical of David Day’s account of Menzies during the early years of the Second World War. In private correspondence, Dr Martin was dismissive of Brett’s use of psychoanalysis as a tool for writing biography (see Allan Martin’s letter dated 16 August 1987 which is published in *The Sydney Institute Quarterly*, Issue 32, March 2008, pages 25-27). Dr Martin’s important two volume history of Robert Menzies was not even mentioned in the “References” section of the publicity flyer which accompanied *Menzies & Churchill At War*.

Senator Kemp’s grant was used to produce the documentaries *The Prime Minister Is Missing* (based on the disappearance and death by drowning of Liberal Party prime minister Harold Holt in 1967), *Monash: The Forgotten Anzac* (based on General Monash’s career in the First World War), *Famous*

*Victory: Chifley’s Battle for Coal* (based on former Labor prime minister Ben Chifley’s handling of the 1949 coal strike) and *Menzies & Churchill At War*.

The first three mentioned documentaries had their flaws but succeeded in telling a story quite well. The other, however, was a shocker. All four documentaries were a Screen Australia Making History Production. They were produced with the assistance of Film Victoria and developed and produced in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The scripts of all the documentaries were approved by ABC TV Documentaries before they were aired on the ABC. Without taxpayers’ money the documentaries would never have been produced.

## MENZIES’ (ALLEGED) AMBITION

In Chapters 10 and 11 of *Menzies and Churchill At War: A Controversial New Account of the 1941 Struggle for Power* (Angus & Robertson, 1986) David Day ran the line that, when war-time prime minister in 1941, Menzies wanted to leave Australia, settle in Britain and replace Winston Churchill as the United Kingdom’s prime minister. At Page 145 of his book, Day described Menzies’ “basic strategy” at the time as follows – “first to isolate Churchill and then replace him completely”.

At pages 148-149, Day again maintained that, circa April 1941, Menzies’ attention “was increasingly being diverted towards the overthrow of Churchill and away from his brief as Australian Prime Minister”. However, as Allan Martin, documented at pages 354-355 of *Robert Menzies A Life: Volume 1*, there is no evidence to support Day’s theory.

## ENTER JOHN MOORE AT 360 DEGREE

Following a commission by the ABC, Screen Australia engaged John Moore at 360 Degree Films to do a documentary on Robert Menzies. Moore filmed four commentators for his documentary – namely Joan Beaumont, Judith Brett and David Day and Gerard Henderson. Henderson, author of *Menzies Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*, flew to Melbourne in August 2007 at John Moore’s request and was interviewed at some length for the program. However, every one of Henderson’s comments ended up on the cutting room floor. But the leftist Judith Brett made 13 appearances in the documentary and the leftist David Day made seven appearances. It’s called balance – ABC style. Joan Beaumont, who is neither critical nor supportive of Menzies, made six appearances. Heather Henderson, Menzies’ daughter, made four appearances. She was

supportive of her father – but viewers would have expected this.

*Menzies & Churchill At War*, which went to air on 30 October 2008, commenced with footage about the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1939 and then the narrator made the following comment: “On the other side of the world, the newly elected Australian prime minister Robert Menzies commits troops once again in support of the Mother Country.”

Contrary to the implication in the film, Menzies did not use the term “Mother Country” in the speech in which he announced that Australia was at war with Germany. The demeaning term “Mother Country” has become a sneering reference – which is associated with the left-wing view, enunciated by John Pilger among others, that in 1914-1918 and again in 1939 Australia fought “other people’s wars”.

What Menzies said in 1939 was constitutionally accurate. In 1939 the Statute of Westminster had not been ratified by Australia and Australian foreign policy was part of British foreign policy. However, Menzies also said – and believed – that in 1939 it was in Australia’s national interest to oppose Adolf Hitler and the Nazi German regime in Europe and North Africa. The Second World War was precisely that – i.e. a world war. There was little opposition in Australia to the despatch of the AIF to fight Hitlerism and virtually no one at the time, except members of the Communist Party, declared that Australia was fighting another nation’s war by committing troops in support of the “Mother Country”.

The sneering introduction set the tone for *Menzies & Churchill At War*. The documentary also ran the long established left-wing line that Menzies wanted to desert Australia and that he hoped that he would become prime minister of Britain. Judith Brett was given space in the documentary to make the following (ridiculous) comment:

**Whether he [Menzies] ever realistically imagined he could become prime minister of England, I don’t know. But I think, given the sort of man he was, there would have been a sense of opening up of exciting possibilities if he were to stay.**

In other words, Dr Brett stated her theory – despite the fact that she concedes that she does not know whether it is true or not.

## ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

On 10 September 2008 John Moore emailed Gerard Henderson advising that *Menzies & Churchill At War*

would air in late October 2008. He added: “The section in the Menzies program on the formation of the Liberal Party is quite short and unfortunately there wasn’t room to include your interview.” The email surprised Henderson. When interviewed for Moore’s film, he had been asked to respond to 25 questions raised by John Moore about Menzies – and only one question related to the formation of the Liberal Party.

Henderson was not forwarded an advance copy of *Menzies & Churchill At War* DVD and did not watch the film until the weekend of 8-9 November 2008. After viewing it, Henderson emailed John Moore on 18 November 2008. At the conclusion of his email, Henderson made a specific request:

**I noted at the weekend that I am thanked in the credits at the end of *Menzies & Churchill At War*. This is quite misleading since it implies that I had something to do with the documentary when this is manifestly not the case. The fact is that my views about both Menzies and Churchill during the Second World War were completely rejected by you. In spite of this, you are attempting to gain credibility for *Menzies & Churchill At War* by falsely associating me with the documentary. This is dishonest. I request that the misleading reference be deleted in any further screenings of *Menzies & Churchill At War*.**

Moore did not reply to Henderson’s email. Henderson wrote about the documentary in passing in his *Sydney Morning Herald* and *West Australian* column on 18 November 2008. The general topic was on how the Liberal Party funds its opponents. At the end of his column the following comment was made:

**In 2005 the Howard Government provided \$7.5 million over three years for the production of documentaries under the Making History Initiative. Good idea, pity about some of the products. Over the past month ABC1 has screened a number of these documentaries – including one on the Labor Party hero Ben Chifley and one on the Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies.**

***Infamous Victory: Ben Chifley’s Battle for Coal* is co-written by leftist Bob Ellis and the film’s historical consultants include left-of-centre historians Phillip Deery and Ross McMullin. The documentary is**

favourable to Chifley – even to the extent of exaggerating his opposition to communism. So much so that no one talks about the fact that, in his final speech, Chifley actually warned against anti-communism. Still, it's a harmless product.

Not so *Menzies & Churchill at War*. Here the script is written by producer John Moore, and there are no conservative historical consultants. The two main interviewees are the left-wing academics Judith Brett and David Day, who run the standard left-wing line that Menzies wanted to quit Australia in 1941 and hoped to become prime minister of Britain. Of course, there is no evidence for this assertion – as Menzies' biographer Allan Martin demonstrated. Moore excluded any dissenting opinion on this issue. Moore's introduction carries the left-wing line that in 1939 Menzies committed Australian troops "in support of the Mother Country". In fact, Menzies committed the Australian Imperial Force to war in 1939 because he, with most Australians, believed that it was a good idea to fight Nazism. Moore also excluded any contrary opinion on this issue.

## AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

On the same day as his column appeared, Henderson sent another copy of his (unacknowledged) email of 18 November 2008 to Moore. Moore wrote a "Dear Mr Henderson" email on 19 November. He said that he was "sorry" that Henderson "didn't like the film" and declared that "we did our best to be "as balanced as possible". However, Moore did not say how the documentary could be as balanced as possible when he had given a total of 20 grabs to Brett and Day but had excluded Henderson's opinion on the same topics. Moore then made the extraordinary claim that perhaps the debate on the topic could take place now that the documentary had gone to air:

Personally I would like to encourage debate on this subject and one of the things we have discussed at 360 is making a clip regarding this debate that could be included as an extra on the DVD and our website. A clip which could include excerpts from your interview. In regard to the thank you at the end of the film it wasn't meant to help us

gain credibility but was a genuine acknowledgement that you went out of your way to assist us.

Henderson sent Moore an email on 21 November 2008 which concluded as follows:

I note that you (now) want to encourage debate on the topic. In my view this is a fine sentiment – but the execution is somewhat late. If you had really wanted to encourage debate on Winston Churchill and Robert Menzies you would have ensured that there was genuine discussion in *Menzies & Churchill At War*. Instead you consciously censored any alternative view from the documentary. My request for my name to be deleted from the Credits at the end of *Menzies & Churchill At War* remains. The fact is that nothing of what I said about Menzies or Churchill was included in your film. Absolutely nothing. Clearly 360 Degree Films Pty Ltd has used my name to gain credibility for *Menzies & Churchill At War* while rejecting every one of my opinions. The reference to me in the Credits is quite misleading and should be removed.

## MOORE RATIONALE

While banning any debate within his own documentary, John Moore insisted on having his response to Henderson published on the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Letters Page. On 20 November 2008 the *SMH* carried the following letter:

**MacKenzie King, the prime minister of Canada, dined with Campbell Stuart, a director of *The Times*, on May 15, 1941, and wrote in his diary that Stuart told him: "Menzies' ambition was to be prime minister of England and that there were some in England prepared to accept him." Stuart had met Menzies several days before. This is only one of numerous pieces of evidence that Menzies was concerned enough about Churchill's leadership to consider taking over himself. Gerard Henderson assumes that to mention this in my documentary *Menzies And Churchill At War* implies a criticism of Menzies, when it was a quite rational response to the terrible state of the war and to Churchill's erratic leadership.**

John Moore, Brunswick (Vic)

As Moore should have known, this is not direct evidence. Rather, it is hearsay upon hearsay. It is a report of what Mackenzie King claims he was told by Campbell Stuart about what Stuart maintained to be Menzies' attitude. There is absolutely nothing here which is evidence of what Menzies either said or wrote. In his letter to the *SMH*, Moore conveniently overlooked the fact that Mackenzie King was a known antagonist of Menzies. Also, Moore deliberately fudged the quote by omitting some words and changing the order of the note. What Mackenzie King actually wrote in his diary for 15 May 1941 was as follows:

**It was nearly 6 which [sic] I left the office, and had time only for a short rest before Campbell Stuart came to dinner at 7.30. He stayed until 10.30, and we had an interesting talk together. Among other things, he mentioned that he thought Menzies ambition was to be Prime Minister of England, and that there were perhaps in England some who would be prepared to accept him.**

By deleting the word "perhaps" from his *SMH* letter, Moore attempted to suggest that Stuart's opinion (as reported by King) was less qualified than was in fact the case. Moore also failed to mention that King reported, in the same diary entry, that Stuart believed that "if anything happened to Churchill" he would be replaced by Ernest Bevin – not Menzies. It is intellectually dishonest to distort quotations to suit a particular theory.

In his email to Henderson dated 19 November 2008, Moore attached a copy of a review of David Day's book *Menzies & Churchill At War* by Lord Blake – whom Moore commented "has written extensively on the Conservative Party in Britain and has a deep knowledge of Second World War history". Once again, Moore was quite disingenuous. A reading of this review (which was published in *The Financial Times* on 28 March 1987) reveals that Lord Blake merely commented on Dr Day's book. Moreover, Blake's review is replete with such words and phrases as "perhaps", "it is difficult to assess how serious the [leadership] threat really was", another "perhaps", and "it is hard to believe". The fact is that Lord Blake did not identify himself with the view that Menzies wanted to – or could realistically have expected to – succeed Churchill as Britain's prime minister in 1941.

It is a matter of record that Day's theory was not even raised in *Churchill: A Major New Assessment of his Life in Peace and War* which was edited by Lord Blake

and was published in 1993 – some years after David Day's book. Nor did Robert Blake refer to this matter in his 1998 book *Winston Churchill*. If Lord Blake had really believed in David Day's theory, he surely would have mentioned this in his final works on Churchill before his death in 2003.

The Blake review was given to Moore by Day. This suggests that this is all the additional evidence which Day has to support his thesis. Certainly David Day never challenged Allan Martin's debunking of his thesis when Martin was alive.

## **ABC AND SCREEN AUSTRALIA COME GOOD**

So, how did the saga end up? Kim Dalton, head of ABC TV, took little interest in the matter and effectively told Henderson that he would have to put up with being in the credits to *Menzies & Churchill At War* against his will. Film Victoria said that the issue was beyond its control. And, having spent taxpayers' money on a documentary which lacked balance, John Moore (gratuitously) advised Henderson that if he was "genuinely concerned about the cost to the taxpayer you will save them any further expense". In other words, go away.

However, two participants in the process had the intellectual honesty to concede that significant errors had been made with *Menzies & Churchill At War*. In an email to Henderson dated 2 February 2009, Stuart Menzies (Head of Documentaries, ABC TV) made the following concession:

**Debate is the lifeblood of history and in hindsight I should have insisted on a rebuttal to Day's opinion that Menzies sought Churchill's prime ministership clearly stated....**

And Mark Hamlyn (Director, Commissioned Production, Screen Australia) wrote to Henderson on 27 January 2009 advising that Screen Australia had agreed to his request that his name be removed from the Credits of *Menzies & Churchill At War*. He advised that this could be readily done at little cost. However, *Menzies & Churchill At War* is being sold by the ABC and the DVD will be shown in schools where students will hear only the left-wing line about Menzies' attitude to Australia and Britain in 1941. This is how the ABC tells the Australian story.

