

Dreams of Menzies in Wartime London

Did Australia's then-PM fancy himself as Winston Churchill's replacement? Man of the left David Day has long insisted that was the case, yet has provided not the slightest shred of evidence to support his claim. Anne Henderson attends to his remedial education

Over more than two decades, David Day's grand thesis in his book *Menzies & Churchill at War*—that Robert Menzies returned from England in April 1941 after positioning himself to take Churchill's job—has failed to find support among historians. Nevertheless, it has taken root in popular Australian history. The ABC has even made a documentary based on it. Yet it is an absurd theory—quite unsupported by facts.

Consider Day's argument in more detail. Its central thesis is that Menzies was an empire man leading Australia at a time when the Second World War was going badly for England. Day argues that Menzies continued to support the appeasement of Germany after the declaration of war, disagreeing with Churchill's approach, and travelled to Britain in early 1941 to save the empire by replacing Churchill with himself.

This is a bold thesis. It would surely require strong supporting evidence. But Day himself admits in his "Conclusion" that there is precious *little* evidence. But, he declares, that does not mean it is not correct. He writes on page 252: "the fact that Menzies' attempt [to become UK prime minister] never amounted to anything public and has left very few traces, does not mean it had no substance". In the book's 253 pages Day can do no more than construct a scenario from loose trails which he interprets freely in accord with a Menzies he imagines.

It is significant that the only biographer of Winston Churchill to footnote any of Day's work on Menzies and Churchill is John Charmley in *Churchill: The End of Glory*. Even so, Charmley does not repeat the Day thesis that Menzies was at any stage challenging Churchill over who should rule Britain—or even that Menzies favoured a negotiated peace.

What we do know is that Menzies left England at the end of April 1941 after engaging Churchill over Britain's lack of support for the dominions in the Pacific—an engagement that was tense but futile on Menzies's part. He was not a happy dominion

leader in his last days in London, and his views of Churchill's handling of the war were critical of his style and decisions. But all this was the emotion of a disappointed dominion leader who desperately wanted Britain to look east and not just focus on its survival in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

There is nothing new in this information—Menzie's biographer Allan Martin has made clear how Menzie carried a love-hate view of Churchill during his stay in London in 1941. Menzie recognised that Churchill had an approach to war that was ruthless. He found this hard at times when Australian soldiers were being sacrificed. Menzie also crossed swords with Churchill during his stay in London over treatment of Australia's war command and the lack of defence of Singapore.

As the Egyptian campaign went badly, along with Greece where Australian soldiers had been sent with a minimum of consultation with the Australian command, Menzie began to doubt the Churchill line of attack. He would not be alone in questioning Churchill's view on strategy, however. After the United States entered the war against Hitler in 1942, it likewise opposed Churchill's obsession with taking northern Africa. Churchill prevailed and was later seen to have been right. Disagreement over command and strategy is part of the war game—ultimately, though, the game is about ends, not tactics. And Day cannot find any evidence that Menzie ever disagreed with Churchill over ultimate ends.

Time after time Day makes assertions that sound bold but then prove to have no visible means of support. On page 2 of *Menzie & Churchill at War*, for instance, he asserts that "Menzie also took to London a continuing commitment to the largely discredited policy of appeasement." Day offers no evidence to support such a statement. Nor is there evidence for it anywhere else. Menzie was a stalwart supporter of British action from September 1939 until the end of the war.

All Western leaders in the late 1930s had stuck with a policy of appeasement, even up to the latter part of 1939. But it was Neville Chamberlain and Menzie who eventually declared war on Hitler, at the beginning of September 1939, and it was Menzie who committed Australian troops to the war against Hitler. The Australian Labor Party opposed that commitment until halfway through 1940.

Menzie was no appeaser after September 1939. There is no evidence in private or on the public record to suggest otherwise. Day will have none of this, asserting on page 253 that, "If the peak of Menzie's ambition was to be found in Downing Street and the purpose was to save the British Empire, the means was to be found in a negotiated peace with Germany."

On page 7, Day states that Menzies favoured peace in August 1939. Yes, he did, as did just about every Western leader, Roosevelt among them. The horror of the First World War had transfixed the Western world for two decades. The idea of another blood sacrifice of young men was hard to accept. But while Chamberlain and Menzies committed troops to the conflict with Nazi Germany in late 1939, President Roosevelt in the USA promised his citizens, during the 1940 presidential election, that no US soldier would be sent to fight Hitler.

There is evidence, however, that Stanley Melbourne Bruce—Australia’s High Commissioner in London—was of the view that deals could be done with Hitler through Mussolini. Lord Halifax had taken the same view in May 1940 when Churchill, with the British Expeditionary Force trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk, stood up to him and used the outer Cabinet to support his belief that Britain should fight on. But there is no evidence of such activity from Menzies—quite the contrary.

Though the idea of a negotiated settlement continued to circulate in London as the war against Hitler went badly through 1941, and though many of those Menzies met in London could be said to have shared that idea, at no stage was there any sign that Menzies agreed with them. Indeed, as late as April 29, 1941, on the eve of his departure from London, after a cable from the acting Australian Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden, queried to what extent there was support for a compromise peace, Menzies was—as Day admits—startled by the suggestion. He cabled back to Fadden that there was “no section of the United Kingdom Government which has in mind possibility of concluding peace with Germany”. Yet Day ignores the evidence of what this says of Menzies.

On page 59, however, Day is forced to admit that on arrival in London Menzies’s “message was simple and designed to evoke a ready response. Britain, he said, was not alone. The whole Empire was behind her and would go all out to win.” These are not the words of an appeaser.

But what need of evidence or even mere plausibility when the historian can simply imagine for himself what the statesman thought, said, or did?

On page 23, Day asserts that, as Menzies and Churchill disagreed over the need for additional defence support for the Pacific Dominions:

[I]t seemed to Menzies, his [Churchill’s] wildly aggressive policies threatened to destroy not only the Empire but Britain itself. This was then the basis of Menzies’ modern crusade—to rescue the Imperial fortress from the infidel, Churchill, and if

need be, come to terms with the enemy at the gates. Firstly, though, Britain would have to be made secure from the imminent threat of invasion.

Not even a footnote from Day supports this assertion. His technique is mockery and simple ridicule. Day set out to paint Menzies as an empire buffoon. The real Menzies, who admired and respected Churchill, even as he disputed Churchill's war tactics, does not feature here. Day constructs a Menzies who did not exist.

On page 23, Day writes of Bruce pressing for a negotiated settlement in May 1940—one that Halifax would also press for. Day goes on to link Bruce's moves to Menzies—even as he admits that Martin Gilbert has shown that there was a contrast in the attitudes of Bruce and Menzies at this time. Day rejects Gilbert's view, saying that Bruce and Menzies were in accord in their view of Britain's prospects.

Gilbert is right—Menzies and Bruce disagreed on a negotiated settlement but agreed on the deteriorating war scenario for Britain. One was an appeaser to the end (Bruce) while the other was ready to follow Churchill and fight (Menzies). Day offers simply a conspiracy view of Menzies. But first Day has to find a way around the evidence.

On page 36, accordingly, Day admits that Menzies strongly supported Churchill's decision to fight on, quoting Menzies's speech in Western Australia on December 19, 1940, where he warned his listeners that any who "indulge in a hope that some temporary compromise may be arrived at are merely being guilty of treason to the cause for which we stand". But Day then explains away this clear spoken record of Menzies's sentiments about the Allied war aims and his support for Churchill, offering this conclusion (unfootnoted and, it appears, completely from Day's imagination):

Menzies' public utterances cannot necessarily be taken as an accurate guide to his private feelings ... It is likely that he still retained a tendency to support, whenever politically possible, a peace that would avoid the looming, total, world conflict and preserve the coherence of the Empire.

This is an outrageous claim made against all evidence to the contrary.

On page 52, Day continues to assert the possibility that Menzies questioned Churchill's war aims:

perhaps, in his mind's eye, Menzies was even then transferring the death and destruction of war to Europe and counting the cost of Churchill's policy of total victory. If the sands of North Africa could absorb so much blood and treasure, how

much more would be lost if the war was pushed back into Europe? These thoughts may well have begun to occur to Menzies.

Well, maybe; maybe not. Day offers no evidence for this musing, which is simply a projection of his view of Menzies as a sell-out man, even when everything Menzies did and said while on his trip in 1941 was in support of the Allied cause and fighting on.

On page 62, Day jumps from Menzies's concern at Churchill so easily committing troops to Greece to yet another wild assertion based on his incorrect assumptions about Menzies's feelings:

Churchill was apparently able to make such decisions. It provides further indication of Menzies' receptivity to the possibility of a compromise peace that would remove this necessity for difficult and distasteful life and death decisions.

Right from the first day of the war Menzies was never open to a compromise peace—Day just asserts that he was without producing any evidence. Moreover, while Menzies worried about the Australian troops committed to Greece, he also went along with the commitment to Greece in support of Churchill.

By page 78, however, Day is forced to admit that by the beginning of March 1941, Menzies was more and more an admirer of Churchill. He notes that Menzies's diary for March 31 contains lines that show Menzies now realised Churchill's strength as war leader. On the same page, however, Day asserts that, in coming weeks, "Menzies would make frantic efforts to extinguish Churchill as Britain's driving force." This assertion of what is to come will be built from flimsy moments and chatter, complete with more of Day's purple prose.

As a dominion leader in London over more than two months, Menzies was a curiosity for the media. He was entitled to attend War Cabinet meetings and he addressed a number of public events. His association with the newspaper magnate and Churchill confidant Lord Beaverbrook also added to his noteworthiness.

As the war intensified, with defeats for the Allies in North Africa and Greece and continued bombing of the south of England, unrest grew among a section of Churchill's opponents in Conservative ranks and the feeling that his dogmatic style of leadership needed to be challenged. Interestingly, these rumours did not spread among Labour supporters of the government. Labour's Hugh Dalton, also close to Menzies, continued to support Churchill. But in some Conservative ranks, the talk was that the ageing Lloyd George was ready to make a move against Churchill. Known as "the

Welsh Pétain”, Lloyd George was seen as a heavyweight who favoured a negotiated peace. Whether these rumours ever had real depth is questionable. On the only occasion that Lloyd George stood in the House of Commons—on May 7, 1941—to condemn Churchill over the Greek campaign, he received just three votes, compared to 457 in support of Churchill.

From his time as a senior cabinet minister in the Lyons government, Menzies had contacts in London—many of whom had favoured Chamberlain over Churchill. Day uses Menzies’s association with such figures, who were aghast at Churchill’s dictatorial style in a time of crisis, as evidence that Menzies was somehow plotting to challenge Churchill’s leadership. This, however, is a giant step too far.

Menzies had a good visit to the UK, enhancing his standing as an impressive figure and as a dominion leader supporting Britain at a time of great peril. At this stage, in early 1941, there was little hope that the USA would commit troops to the war against Hitler. The Lend Lease legislation passed in Congress and signed into law by President Roosevelt in March 1941 allowed the USA to provide food, oil and materiel to Britain and its allies. The USA also made a tidy profit from this trade, which took Britain many decades to repay.

Although Churchill was working feverishly to woo America, the commitment of US troops seemed impossible at the time. Churchill was said to have slept soundly the night he heard of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

David Day makes much use of the variety of press reports that praised Menzies’s speeches in the UK. As tensions mounted over the failing Greek campaign and the losses in North Africa, the Beaverbrook press and a number of journalists who had crossed Menzies’s path used his high profile to campaign for an Imperial War Cabinet.

Menzies himself was keen to have increased dominion representation at Whitehall in the hope of pressuring Churchill to focus on the empire in the Pacific and South-East Asia. But it is one thing to recognise Menzies’s frustration with Churchill over the, at times, insouciant treatment of the Australian command and quite another to suggest—without evidence—that this was a sign of Menzies seeking to become the British prime minister.

To paint his own very different picture David Day has to weave a conspiracy theory. From the outset, he colours his description of Menzies’s leadership in the war as one not entirely supportive of the war itself. That Menzies spoke of his “melancholy duty”

in declaring war in September 1939 is for Day not “all out support”. But Menzies’s sentiments were what almost all Australians felt at the time—including those in the Labor Party. No one wanted war—especially after the eagerness of 1914 that had turned into a deadly nightmare.

Day also builds up Lloyd George as a figure of significance in the UK, suggesting he might have been an alternative to Churchill in May 1940 as prime minister. This is not borne out by the evidence and rests on a picture of British politics as it had been more than a decade before.

Quite late in his time in London, Menzies was advised by the Australian businessman W.S. Robinson to visit Lloyd George. He initially rejected this advice. Just days before leaving England, however, Menzies went to visit Lloyd George and recorded a lengthy summary of the points of agreement they had reached on Churchill and his leadership.

Day, however, connects the Menzies–Lloyd George meeting to the press campaign for an Imperial War Cabinet. The suggestion is then made that Menzies was plotting to make a move on the British prime minister. But there is no evidence of any connection—and Day’s conclusion lacks substance (pages 151–53).

About the Lloyd George meeting with Menzies—and having made much use of Menzies’s long summary on Churchill even though it records no suggestion of toppling him—Day can only resort to an imaginative conclusion: “Menzies could sense the possibilities of creating a cabal. Whether the cabal was to be transformed into a Cabinet would now depend on the fall of events.” This is pure conjecture based on Day’s own remarkable powers of speculation.

Again and again, Day translates Menzies’s frustration at Churchill’s dictatorial methods into designs on seizing the reins himself. On page 30, Day links Lloyd George’s waiting-in-the-wings presence with such frustration in Menzies—there is, however, no connection. But Day argues—again with no evidence—the following: “While Lloyd George patiently waited for Churchill to stumble, Menzies’ preoccupation with Churchill’s fitness for office continued to grow.” Why put the two things together when there is no evidence they are connected?

On page 33, Day makes another imaginative leap to an unproven conclusion:

Menzies opposed the creation of any Imperial War Cabinet requiring the constant attendance of Dominion Prime Ministers, though he urged that there should be a

conference of Dominion Prime Ministers. Menzies had now made the first move in a campaign he intended should take him to the very pinnacle of power in London.

Again, we are given no evidence.

On page 71, Day discusses the regard for Menzies in the Beaverbrook press—which saw him as someone who could make an impact at Westminster. Churchill had relied on Beaverbrook to revamp aircraft production, as Minister for Aircraft Production. Like many, Beaverbrook found it difficult working with Churchill and was looking for a way out by early 1941. He had tried to resign a few months earlier, but Churchill had not let him.

There was every reason for Beaverbrook to find in Menzies a ready figure who might help him stir against the dictatorial ways of Churchill. Beaverbrook was not one to take too many orders either. Menzies continued to meet with Beaverbrook in the hope of getting contracts for Australia to manufacture aircraft for Britain. Beaverbrook strung him along in charming ways, throwing in favourable press reports, while all the time refusing to sign any aircraft deals. In Beaverbrook's case, Menzies was the bait, not the trapper.

There is also no record of anything by way of a plan to unseat Churchill or to put Menzies forward—in fact the likelihood is nonsense. But using him to stir things up—that was possible. And Menzies himself wanted to stir up Churchill to get defence certainty for Australia.

On page 89, David Day sees great moment in Menzies's meeting up with media magnate Lord Kemsley for tea at the Ritz. There is no record of their conversation. Nevertheless, Day leaps to the conclusion that it “may well have provided the basis in Menzies' mind for the idea that it was not beyond him to make a bid for Downing Street”. Another case of maybe, maybe not. Day's guesswork is not substantiated by anything more solid.

Kemsley had previously told Menzies he would be good value in Westminster and his *Daily Sketch* had warmly reported Menzies's address to more than 200 British MPs. But, in his diary, Menzies laughed at any suggestion that he would be given a seat at Westminster, musing (tongue-in-cheek) that some MPs in London might be wishing he lost at home so he could join them in London. Day becomes obsessed with the idea that every move Menzies makes in the later stages of his visit to the UK is a move to get to Westminster.

On page 95, Day writes that a visit Menzies made to the regions to meet business representatives (as Lyons had done in 1935) “may well have had a double purpose, since it allowed him to take the political temperature outside of London”. Really? Again, maybe, maybe not.

On page 103, Day comments that because Menzies dined with a group of Young Conservatives and discussed the future of the Conservative Party, this suggests that “Menzies may even then have been sounding out his prospects in British politics”. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe they were discussing the future of the Tory party—which mattered a great deal to young Tories at the time.

On page 116, Day comments on Lloyd George showing renewed confidence in the House of Commons and concludes: “The coalescing of the anti-Churchill forces had begun and Menzies and Lloyd George would soon be at their head.” There is no footnote for this except a letter from Lloyd George’s private secretary Frances Stevenson to Liddell Hart noting that Lloyd George had lifted his game in the House.

By page 127, Day is so convinced he has proved that Menzies was plotting to replace Churchill that he starts to question Menzies’s honesty as if to support his thesis. Menzies informed Arthur Fadden on April 14 that Churchill had asked him to prolong his stay in the UK for another fortnight because of the military crisis in the Middle East where the AIF were playing a crucial role. Day asserts that this “is doubtful”—that is, he implies that Menzies was lying to Fadden.

Thus, Day asserts that Menzies is a liar and that there was no reason Churchill might want the Australian prime minister to remain nearer his troops in a crisis—on the basis of no evidence at all, but just to get around obstacles to his thesis.

It goes on like this for many more pages until Day thinks he has clinched it. A note in Australian Secretary of Defence Co-ordination Fred Shedden’s diary towards the end of the trip seems to be a vital clue.

Shedden had been with Menzies by then for three months and was a close associate of UK civil service supremo Maurice Hankey, a Chamberlain supporter who was losing influence under Churchill. At various meetings with Hankey, Shedden had told him of the Australians’ frustrations with Whitehall, and Hankey was doing what he could to suggest ways of influencing outcomes for them.

A note in Shedden’s diary from that time shows that he appraised his boss as a better leader than Churchill or Roosevelt and writes a throwaway musing asking, “Why should not a Dominion statesman lead the Empire in war?” Day uses this diary entry

to suggest that this was not just musing by a subordinate but the thought of Robert Menzies himself.

Nothing suggests this has anything to do with Menzies—it is more likely the headiness of a loyal senior officer in private. In a further draft of the diary among Shedden's papers, he had removed his musing on dominion prime ministers leading the empire. These two versions, as I discovered, can be found among the Shedden collection in the National Library in Canberra.

Shedden had obviously got carried away—and at the time was releasing some of his frustration to his diary. On page 151, however, Day writes:

This frank admission, from within his own camp, of Menzies' ultimate ambition, reveals the Trojan horse nature of his calls for Australian representation in the War Cabinet. Such representation was the means to a grander end.

So what Shedden thinks is what Menzies thinks! It's as simple as that. Needless to say, Day provides no evidence.

Finally, in spite of all Day's imaginative conclusions, he has to admit—on the evidence—that there was no real alternative to Churchill in anyone's minds at Whitehall in mid-1941. The British Prime Minister was dominant.

It was this dominance that Menzies was trying to get around for wider Australian interests—so much so that he left on bad terms with Churchill after a final confrontation which gave Menzies no further hope that Britain would see the Pacific any differently.

Taking with him a letter from Maurice Hankey to Lord Halifax in Washington, Menzies hoped that Halifax might be able to have some influence over his old rival in Downing Street. Nothing would come of this either.

And what was in the letter? Hankey told Halifax that he could see no leader other than Churchill for Britain but if anything should happen, Halifax would be the alternative. Obviously, there was no move either to oust Churchill or to replace him with a dominion prime minister.

Day offers one final piece of trivia as some sort of proof that there were moves afoot to replace Churchill with Menzies. In his diary, the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King recorded that on May 15, Campbell Stuart, a Canadian and a director of the London *Times*, had told him that "Menzies' ambition was to be Prime Minister

of England, and that there were perhaps in England some who would be prepared to accept him”.

This chatter of Campbell Stuart is pure hearsay from an untrustworthy gossip. Stuart was known in London circles as something of a teller of tall tales who imagined himself more at the centre of things than he ever was. The likelihood that Campbell Stuart’s testimony had any reality is very questionable. Even if it was part of the London chatter it does not prove the case. On the contrary—as we all know, gossip can enlarge, misconstrue and invent. What Campbell Stuart had passed on was full of all that.

As Churchill once said of reports of certain wild talk from Campbell Stuart, “such *bruits de malveillance* are not evidence”. He might have been speaking of David Day.

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