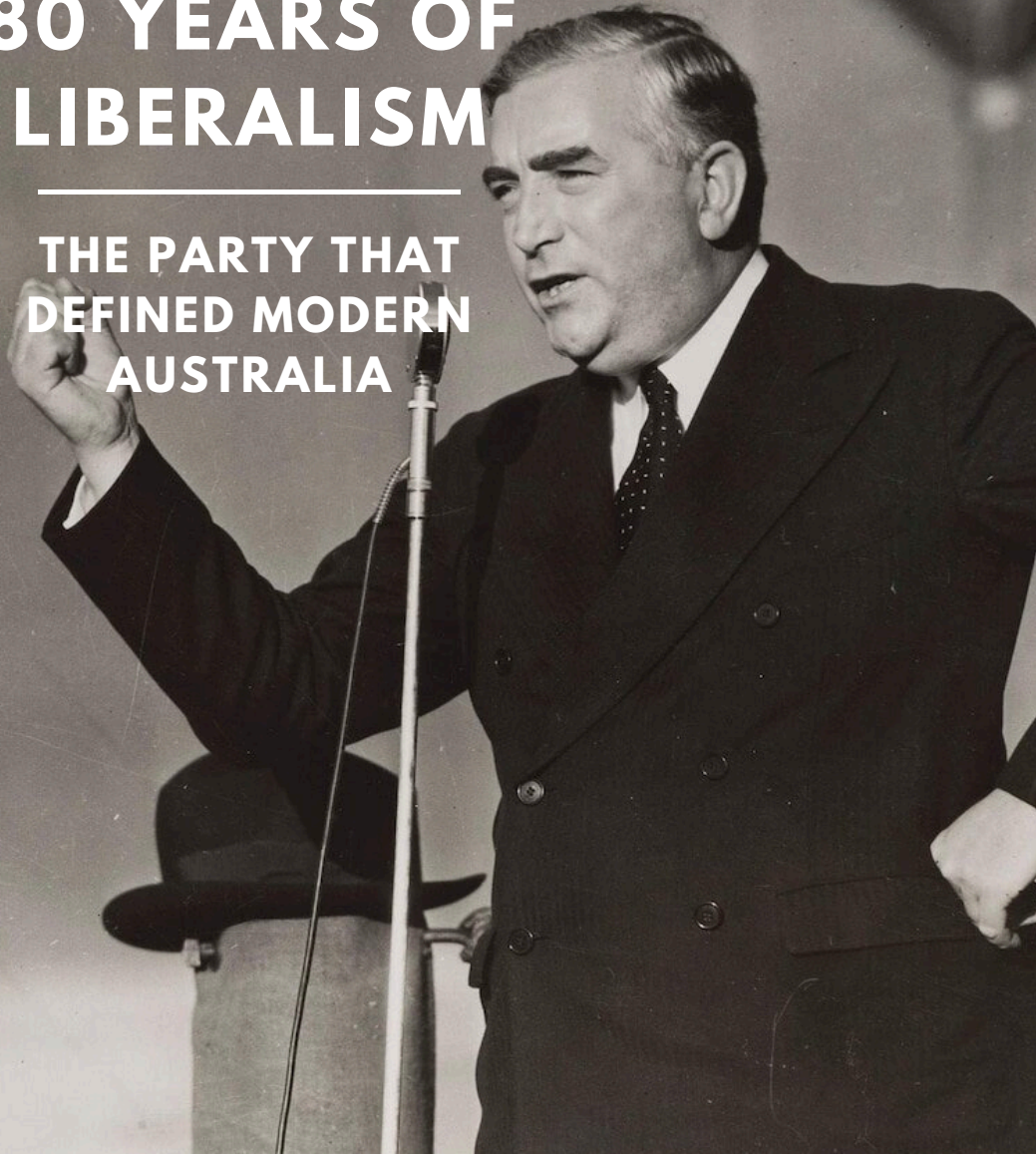# Robert Menzies
INSTITUTE

80 YEARS OF LIBERALISM

THE PARTY THAT DEFINED MODERN AUSTRALIA

The Robert Menzies Institute at the University of Melbourne is a prime ministerial library and museum established to honour Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, Robert Menzies.

The Robert Menzies Institute was established by the University of Melbourne and the Menzies Research Centre in April 2021.

The Institute's mission is to advance the understanding of Australian history by promoting Robert Menzies's enduring contribution and vision for Australia as a country of freedom, opportunity, enterprise and individual dignity.

This exhibition is curated by the Hon. Dr David Kemp AC, Georgina Downer, Dr Zachary Gorman, and Victoria Hronas. Exhibition design by HOHAB.

"Australia is undoubtedly at the beginning of a revival of liberal political thought... there will be involved many conferences, much thought and work, a great stirring of minds... Great movements are never purely a matter of organisation, tremendously important though organisation is. Nor can they be produced merely by artificial means. To have a really great movement, one worth while, you must have great ideas."

ROBERT MENZIES, 29 OCTOBER 1943

THE CONTEXT

By late 1944, Australia had spent five years deeply entrenched in a brutal global conflict, fighting to uphold the ideals of liberal democracy against the malevolent forces of fascism and totalitarianism.

As the Allies gradually achieved ascendency in Europe and the Pacific, attention turned towards the changed political landscape and the future of our post-war nation.

In the 1930s, Australian democracy faced a formidable challenge in the Great Depression. In response, liberal and conservative groups joined to form the United Australia Party (UAP).

Demonstrating the spirit of compromise essential for navigating crises, the UAP embraced several economically conservative Labor MPs who had broken away from the Scullin Government.

In 1931, led by former Labor Tasmanian Premier, Joseph Lyons, the UAP triumphed at the federal election. As Prime Minister (1932–39), Lyons's government succeeded in pulling Australia out of the calamity.

However, this very success diminished the UAP's raison d'être. When Lyons tragically passed away in office on Good Friday 1939, Robert Menzies succeeded him as UAP Leader and Prime Minister.

With his focus on the war effort surpassing his interest in partisan bickering, Menzies was dismayed to find himself leader of a coalition rapidly disintegrating into disparate groups and minor parties across NSW and Victoria.

Menzies resigned as Prime Minister in August 1941.

Prime Minister Joseph Lyons's body transported back to Tasmania following his death on Good Friday 1939. Image credit: NSW State Library.

The UAP's lack of a clear liberal vision for post-war Australia left Labor free to pursue its own vision of a powerful centralised government with greater control through an explicit program of 'socialisation'.

For instance, The Constitution Alteration (Post-War Reconstruction and Democratic Rights) 1944, often referred to as the 'Fourteen Powers' or 'Fourteen Points' Referendum, aimed to expand the Commonwealth's jurisdiction and grant it the authority to legislate on fourteen specific matters for a duration of five years including but not limited to national health, family allowances, employment, and foreign investment.

At the same time, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was gaining in strength and advocating for an Australia in which the state would be completely dominant.

1940 Communist Party rally held in Melbourne.
Image credit: University of Melbourne Archives.

UAP Advertisement for the 1940 election.
Image credit: The Bulletin.

THE UNITY CONFERENCE

By the 1943 election, the UAP had become so weak and rudderless that in an unprecedented move, Country Party Leader Arthur Fadden stepped in as Leader of the Opposition. The election results were devastating. The UAP secured only 14 out of 74 seats in the House of Representatives, signalling its demise as a significant political entity. In the wake of this defeat, a reinvigorated Robert Menzies called for 'A Liberal Revival' and succeeded Fadden as Leader of the Opposition.
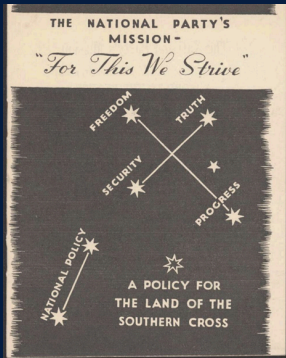
WA National Party pamphlet. Image credit: Menzies's personal papers held in the National Library of Australia.
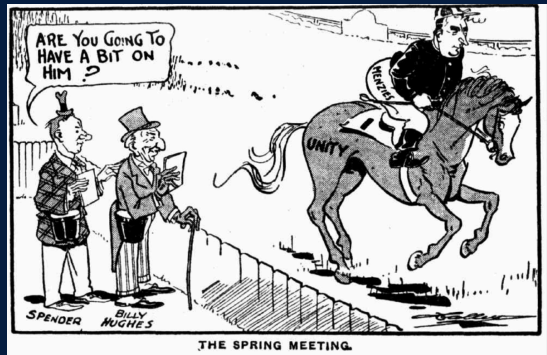
Cartoon from Smith's Weekly, 21 October 1944. Image credit: National Library of Australia.

As a crucial first step, Menzies spearheaded the successful 'No' campaign against Labor Prime Minister John Curtin's 'Fourteen Powers' referendum of 1944. Building on this victory, Menzies invited various organisations 'which stand for a liberal, progressive policy and are opposed to Socialism with its bureaucratic administration and restriction of personal freedom' to a 'Unity Conference' in Canberra, from 13–16 October 1944.

At the time there were multiple political organisations which Menzies described as 'liberal organisations', with names such as the People's Party (QLD), Services and Citizens Party (VIC), and Liberal Democratic Party (NSW).

18 organisations agreed to be represented at the conference, including:

- Women's Electoral Leagues from Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland

- New South Wales (delegates) and the Victorian Institutes of Public Affairs (observers)

- Victorian, Tasmanian and West Australian Constitutional Leagues

- NSW Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party (NSW)

- Liberal and Country League (SA), the Country-National Organisation (QLD)

- Victorian United Australia Organisation, Nationalist Party and Services and Citizens Party

- UAP and Nationalist organisations (TAS) (WA)

One of the first things the attendees agreed upon was a name for the new entity which they were forming: The Liberal Party of Australia.

New Liberal Party is constituted in Albury, New South Wales, 1944. Image credit: National Archives of Australia, M3130 8303872.

FEMALE FOUNDERS

Women's organisations had long played a significant role in the liberal/conservative wing of Australian politics, with their involvement tracing back to the temperance movement aimed at reducing violence against women and the widespread liberal support for female suffrage.

Many of the first women elected to their respective State Parliaments hailed from liberal/conservative parties, including NSW's Millicent Preston Stanley, QLD's Irene Longman, SA's Joyce Steele and Jessie Cooper, and WA's Edith Cowan, the first woman elected to any Australian Parliament.

At an organisational level, Victoria's Australian Women's National League (AWNL), founded in 1904, boasted size and continuity that often surpassed its male counterparts. The newly formed Liberal Party sought to build on this rich tradition.

Besides delegates from the women's electoral leagues, female delegates also represented the NSW Democratic Party and the South Australian Liberal and Country League. A significant achievement for Menzies was persuading the AWNL to merge with the Liberal Party, relinquishing its previously separate status from the Nationalists and the UAP.

Protest Meeting At Town Hall

Newspaper clipping of Millicent Preston Vaughan (née Stanley) speaking to a meeting of the 'Australian Women's Movement Against Socialisation'. Image credit: The Advertiser (Adelaide), 28 November 1947.

Menzies with Annabelle Rankin during the 1946 election campaign, after which she would become Queensland's first female Senator. Image credit: National Archives of Australia.

Menzies wrote that AWNL leader Elizabeth Couchman was one of the two most influential people in the success of the Canberra Conference in 1944. A tough negotiator, she only agreed to a merger based on the condition that women would have guaranteed positions within the party's organisational structure.

Menzies's 'Forgotten People' philosophy also had a particular appeal to women. It expanded political discussions to focus on the home and the family, and on the advancement of women in society, whereas Labor was focused on industrial workplaces that often excluded women.

In his policy speech for the 1946 election, Menzies said explicitly that: '*This speech is addressed not only to men but to women. Indeed, even more to women than to men!*'

Menzies with Enid Lyons and other leading Liberals in 1946. Image credit: National Library of Australia.

Menzies's 1949 Cabinet would be the first to include a woman in Enid Lyons, while at the Federal level Liberal women would match the proud achievements of their state counterparts, making up eight of the first 10 women elected to Federal Parliament.

NATIONAL & PERMANENT

Menzies was resolute in his mission to replace the weak and faction-ridden UAP. The Albury Conference held on 14-16 December 1944 laid the groundwork for a new Liberal Party that would be national, permanent, and principled.

The Party's national organisation was structured around Australia's federal system, featuring a Federal Council and a Federal Executive with equal representation from the states, and a permanent secretariat based in Canberra. Each state would have its own division, largely autonomous and empowered to make its own rules on key issues such as preselections.

Determined to free the new party from the control of vested interests, including big business, Menzies ensured the party managed its own fundraising. The new party would rely on membership fees and anonymous donations, preventing any strings from being attached to contributions.

A cornerstone principle was the autonomy of the parliamentary party. MPs would not be dictated to by unelected 'faceless men'; the parliamentary party alone would decide policy. The extra-parliamentary organisation would foster robust policy discussions, informing the decisions of the party's elected representatives.
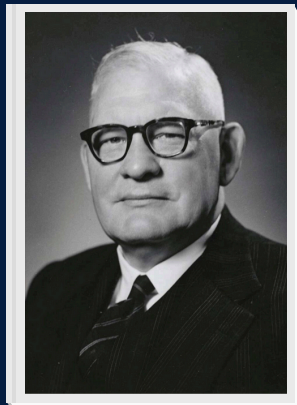

The front facade of R.G. Menzies House, the official headquarters of the Liberal Party of Australia in Canberra.

Cartoon from Smith's Weekly, 6 January 1945. Image credit: National Library of Australia.

DIVISION FOUNDERS
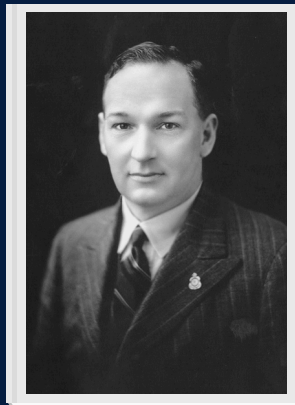
SIR WILLIAM (BILL) SPOONER

Chairman of the NSW Division's Provisional Executive and then First Division President
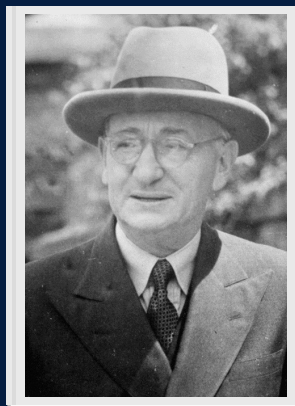
SIR REGINALD CHARLES WRIGHT

Unity Conference Delegate & First President of the Tasmanian Division

SIR THOMAS PLAYFORD

South Australian Premier & Unity Conference Delegate

SIR JOHN BEALS CHANDLER

Founder of the Queensland People's Party and while the QPP did not attend the Unity Conference, it became the de facto Queensland division, rebranded as the Queensland Liberal Party in 1949

SIR WILLIAM HEWSON ANDERSON

Founder of the Services & Citizens Party, Conference Delegate, Victorian Division President and later Federal President

JAMES LAMPARD PATON, OBE
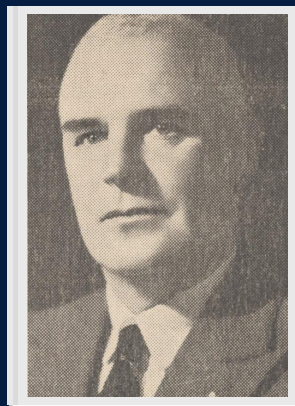
Unity Conference Delegate and First President of the West Australian Division

A PARTY WITH A PHILOSOPHY

Unlike the UAP, the Liberal Party was not created to deal with a single crisis, but to uphold enduring principles which remain relevant today.
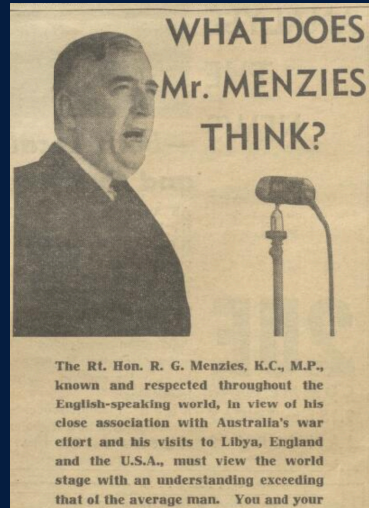
Robert Menzies was also determined that the Liberal Party would be 'a party with a philosophy' that would enable it to resist pressures for selfish legislation on behalf of special interests, and to focus on the public interest.

WHAT DOES Mr. MENZIES THINK?

The Rt. Hon. R. G. Menzies, K.C., M.P., known and respected throughout the English-speaking world, in view of his close association with Australia's war effort and his visits to Libya, England and the U.S.A., must view the world stage with an understanding exceeding that of the average man. You and your

Advertisement for Menzies's weekly radio series, debuting in January 1942. Image credit: Wireless Weekly.

The Party's principles were derived from Australian liberalism – the nation's oldest political tradition which had been highly influential ever since the birth of colonial democracy.

Liberalism argued for legal and political equality amongst citizens and civil liberties including freedom of speech and conscience, of the press and religion, core concepts which the new Liberal Party would continue to uphold.

The essence of liberalism was distilled by Menzies in a series of 105 weekly radio broadcasts delivered between 1942–1944. The most iconic broadcast was 'The Forgotten People', delivered on 24 July 1942.

It was addressed not to those who already had political power, but to the unrepresented people whose life was not to be found in big business or big unions, but in the homes of ordinary Australians whose primary concern was raising their families.

'The essence of a non-Socialist political philosophy or, as I would prefer to put it, a "liberal democratic philosophy", is that in a successful and happy community it is the individual who matters; that you cannot make a powerful State out of weak men; and that you cannot enjoy independence as a Nation unless you have encouraged independence among your citizens.'
– Robert Menzies, 17 September 1943.

Menzies was determined that the new party could not be one of 'negation', focused merely on opposing Labor. It would have its own conception of 'progress'; one which understood that freedom and incentive for individual people were the main drivers to propel the nation forward.

Menzies's liberal vision upheld the primacy of individual people over classes and identity groups, their initiative, and their moral development.

His vision encouraged people to work hard and contribute to the nation, to be 'lifters' rather than 'leaners' – to own their own homes and have a stake in society. His vision also had a strong focus on the importance of education and opportunity.
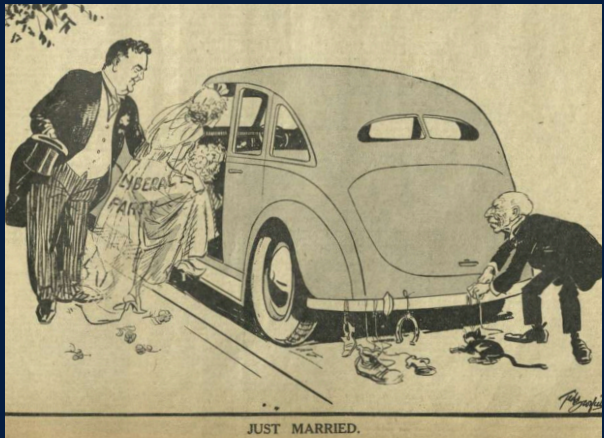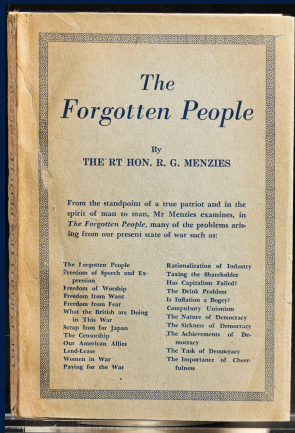
1943 book which published 37 of Menzies's radio broadcasts. Image credit: Robert Menzies Institute.

Cartoon from The Bulletin, 25 October 1944. Image credit: The Bulletin.

LIBERALISM IN PRACTICE

With the creation of the Liberal Party, Australian liberalism at last had an effective political vehicle. The next task was to translate the liberal philosophy into concrete proposals to win over the electorate and improve the nation.

The policies of the party would focus on reducing the burden and restrictions of government which had greatly expanded during the war, freeing up private enterprise to drive the nation forward, and facilitating individual achievement of personal goals.

Child Endowment Handbill from the 1949 election. Image credit: Robert Menzies Institute.

Policies taken to the 1946 election included:

- *a three year program of progressive tax reduction aimed at reducing all income tax rates by 40%.*
- *ending war-time controls such as rationing, investment control, wage pegging, and price fixing, to restore "the freedom of the individual citizen which, after all, was the great cause for which the war was fought."*
- *encouraging private home-ownership by cutting taxes associated with building materials, and making sure that homebuilders had priority access to such materials ahead of government projects.*
- *mandating the use of the secret ballot in union elections, thereby preventing communist intimidation and helping to reduce disruptive strikes.*
- *extending weekly child endowment payments to the first child, to "express in concrete terms our belief that the family is the most precious of all social units."*
- *financial assistance to help the states fund universities.*
- *a vigorous program of immigration to help build up the nation.*
- *a universal health scheme based on contributory insurance payments rather than funded by ordinary taxation.*
- *an inquiry into which government departments needed to be abolished or reduced in size for post-war Australia.*

ROAD TO VICTORY

Robert Menzies hoped that with all these accomplishments, the forces of Australian liberalism could achieve a swift victory. However, the electorate credited the Labor Government for its management of the war, and in 1946, the Liberals only achieved a modest rebound from the UAP's disastrous 1943 result. Of particular concern was Labor's dominance in NSW, where it held nineteen federal seats compared to the Coalition's eight. Critics began to say, 'you can't win with Menzies.'

Prime Minister Ben Chifley's attempt to nationalise Australia's banks, though blocked by the High Court, highlighted the threat of socialism and validated Menzies's warnings, as did other attempted government monopolies in areas like air travel.

The bank nationalisation effort triggered a grassroots backlash, with many seeing it as a threat to the freedoms defended during the war. Women led the charge, with the Australian Women's Movement Against Socialisation attracting thousands to its 'Crusade for Liberty'.

In 1949, the House of Representatives expanded from 74 to 121 seats, introducing a new generation of MPs known as the '49ers'. The Liberal/Country Party Coalition won decisively, securing 74 of the 121 seats and governing until 1972. Menzies led the Party until his retirement in January 1966, becoming the longest-serving Prime Minister in Australian history.
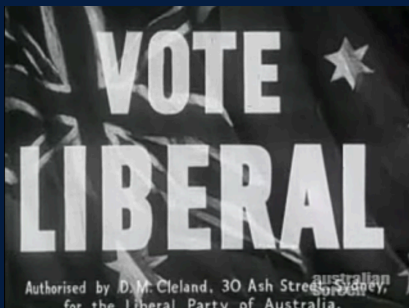
Still from the 1946 Liberal Party cinema advertisement 'The Golden Age'. Image credit: National Film and Sound Archive.

An anti-Chifley float organised by the Bank Employees' Committee attacking 'Ben's Bushrangers' and the 'Commo Bank'. Image credit: National Museum of Australia.

Support

Donate
www.robertmenziesinstitute.org.au/support

Become a member
www.robertmenziesinstitute.org.au/membership

Subscribe
www.robertmenziesinstitute.org.au/contact

Contact

(03) 8344 3411
info@robertmenziesinstitute.org.au
East Wing – Old Quad
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010