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Inside the Canberra Press Gallery: Life in the wedding cake of old parliament house, Rob Chalmers, edited by Sam Vincent and John Wanna, ANU Press 2011. ISBN 9781921862366 (pbk), includes bibliographical references (p. 241–2) and index. Also issued in electronic version via the Internet.

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Political junkies and everyone who has worked in Old or New Parliament House, will read and enjoy ‘Inside the Canberra Press Gallery: Life in the Wedding Cake of Old Parliament House’, the memoir Rob Chalmers, the longest serving member of the Canberra press gallery, completed just before he died. Chalmers himself does say that the book covers ‘events and people who have stuck in my memory’ by way of explaining what at worst could be seen as a series of rollicking stories, and at best a collection of fascinating and unique observations from a ringside seat on history.

The book is a mixed bag, at once glib and gossipy and unique in its insights and in its anecdotes. For historians or political analysts, however, it raises more questions than it answers — about the role of cabinet, the power of prime ministers, the decline of the House of Representatives and the rise of the press gallery as party principal for example. It does give us a flavour of the way it was in those years when Chalmers covered a political and a media world that would go through the throes of major change. For those of us who did not live through those events or were not there, his account of such episodes as the breach of privilege/imprisonment issue, how powerful a factor the Petrov Affair was and how huge the repercussions for Evatt of taking the Molotov letter at face value, and how Gough Whitlam brought the Labor Party into the 20th century is fascinating stuff. How many of us knew, or recall, that it was Gough who invented the shadow cabinet concept? Fascinating, too, are his reflections on the faceless men, the power of caucus, last stand of the hustings and the shift to TV campaigns, all perhaps necessarily rushed over in the coverage of what is a huge amount of history and a whole bevy of issues and episodes which were turning points in one way or another for Australian politics.

One of these was the shift which took place on Chalmers’s watch in the role of the media, including increasingly the electronic media, from being the reporters of the actions they observed to being commentators and then actors, seeing themselves as bona fide players, parties principal, in the political game. This, though, is not a subject of his concern or comment. He misses the point perhaps because he was a captive of it. Chalmers seems simply to accept the media’s right to this role and it slips in unconsciously. For example, ‘politicians... believed in protection, as did a

majority of gallery journalists'; Bert Kelly's speeches against protection influenced 'the Parliament and the Gallery'; 'since the Parliament moved into its permanent building, the gallery has become the central information point of the nation'; and 'holding the government to account is the central role of the gallery'. This is astonishing, an illusion of central position — or is it? As the Murdoch fiasco has so recently revealed, is it we — the people — who have been basking in the delusion that it is in we — the people — and our elected representatives in whom the sovereignty of the nation resides?

Chalmers reminds us that Australia is unique in the world in housing the press gallery in its own space. The reasons were obvious in the early days of Canberra, the new capital in the middle of nowhere with very little infrastructure. Yet 'Old Parliament House' was a temporary arrangement, albeit that lasted from 1927–1988, and there were no plans to house the press gallery in the permanent new one on Constitution Hill. Old habits die hard, however. Politicians by that time had become accustomed to the convenience of their presence, especially in an era when the media was becoming more important than the chambers themselves for public announcements. Prime Minister Hawke protected the press presence in OPH when 25 new seats were created in 1983 and Chalmers concludes: 'The press had once again demonstrated that, even in the Parliament itself, it had far more clout than backbench parliamentarians'.

Is the development of an adversarial relationship between government and the press a necessary corollary of the development of a healthy democracy (in that a characteristic of autocracies and dictatorships is the controlled press)? Was the scorn felt by Chalmers of the ABC's attempts to maintain balance and keep out of the gutter when Jack Coman was its head, the result simply of what he describes as an iron law of journalism, 'the fact that a government gets something right is not nearly as newsworthy as something it gets wrong'? Is rooted in this adversarial relationship the right — and delight — Chalmers takes in revealing the personal foibles of politicians, and the reason he chooses so blatantly to breach what was, perhaps until Oakes revelled in his Kernot–Evans 'scoop', a clear public/private divide in the lives of public figures and, generally, a discreet silence about the personal indiscretions of public figures unless it was clearly in the public interest to do otherwise? There seems to be absolutely no public interest reason to reveal that Robert Menzies had a long standing mistress except that Chalmers could. Similarly in the case of Billy Snedden's shenanigans with an officer at post in Bonn. The only point of this revelation must surely be the cost to the public purse in terms of time and expense the embassy had to spend to resolve the messy issues arising and what this whole episode, and others most of us in this small town of Canberra are aware of, perhaps tell us about the character of the aspirant leader concerned? Or in the case of Killen and Guilfoyle, was a conflict of interest at issue?

There appears to be no point in the Menzies story, and no point in either in the Snedden or the Killen–Guilfoyle story, or no point that is made. In the case of Harold Holt and his mistresses it is. Given the speculation about possible suicide

among other things, there is point in revelation of what appear to be Holt's multiple mistresses, as what they had to say about the state of the man's mind and, presumably his libido, suggest both to be rather buoyant as he waded into the wild waters of Cheviot Bay that took his life.

There are some fabulous anecdotes and wicked pen portraits in this book. We hear about Black Jack McEwen's bloody feet and, fascinatingly, that Murdoch and Fraser shared the same nanny. We are told that Billy McMahon was a liar and a leak, Sinclair tardy, Hawke mean, Hayden quirky, and Evatt a (surprising) patron of the arts. Equally surprising is Howard appearing as the social butterfly. Chalmers concedes the press gallery got Fraser wrong because they made judgements on the look of the man. Will hindsight have the gallery conceding the same, eventually, of what Chalmers would no doubt have called the Gillard girl?

The first chapters of this book appear to have escaped the editors scrutiny — all those yarns for the sake of telling yarns, the factual errors — MPs flying to Canberra in days when there were only trains, the sweeping, ill-informed statements (Singapore 'kicked out' of the Federation of Malaysia) — or did they let it all lie to illustrate that this was the nature of the press and its reporting then? For more than the first 100 pages of this book the prevailing impression is of the self-confessed larrikin lad boasting about writing off expenses on long boozy lunches and telling the tabloid tale of parliamentary history. This reviewer was irritated by the irrelevant and often vulgar bar stool yarns and gratuitous gossip, some of it both very old and stale (at least for those of us who have been around the Canberra traps for some time) that pepper this book: do we really need to know about politicians pissing in their pants or senators being sick in drawers?

Chalmers came of Labor stock and continued to hold Labor sympathies, but this did not prevent him holding good men and true from both sides of politics in high regard. He valued the traditions of parliamentary democracy and deplored its decline, for example, with the loss of great oratory and the shift of parliament from being the focus for major policy proclamation to the sideshow he argues the House of Representatives, at least, has become today. One illustration he uses of the debasing of the parliament is the deliberate increasing inscrutability of budgets, a change felt in the Parliamentary Research Service of the Parliamentary Library whose economists once could assist senators and members directly with budget analysis but, thereafter, had to go to Treasury for facts no longer made available in the budget papers. And it is to Prime Minister John Howard, the most divisive Prime Minister in Chalmers view, that he points the finger of blame.

In his last chapter, Chalmers is hurrying as his clock ticks. He wants to put so much on the record that is in his head. He goes on in his Epilogue to sum up the problems that have come to beset parliamentary democracy — prime ministers too powerful, party discipline too tight, presidential style political campaigns — and take the toughest of challenges to suggest what could be done about it. Here Chalmers is at his most thoughtful. Those who would revitalise participatory parliamentary democracy could do worse than begin here. ▲