

Canberra Laborite with a long memory

The late public servant and ALP official, Bill Byrne, was an engaging link to Labor's history in Canberra, **Stephen Holt** writes.



ACT Advisory Council member Byrne in 1963. *Photo: National Archives of Australia*

Most Canberrans would regard the early 1950s, when Robert Menzies was reinstalled as prime minister and Ben Chifley was opposition leader, as a remote period indeed. Yet until just three weeks ago, people interested in that era were still able to experience its fascination at firsthand simply by making contact with former Canberra public servant Wilfred Ignatius ("Bill") Byrne. His death at the age of 92, on August 13, severed a direct connection with historical events occurring six decades ago and more.

Born in Sydney in 1921, Byrne worked as a clerk and accountant before joining the federal public service. He came to Canberra in 1946, initially working as an investigating officer in the Commonwealth Prices Branch before joining the Department of Commerce and Agriculture. On marrying, he and his wife Margaret moved to a house in McCaughey Street in Turner, which was his home for the rest of his life.

Educated by the Marist Brothers, Byrne was a faithful adherent of both the Catholic Church and the Australian Labor Party. He became an office holder in the ALP's Canberra branch. Along with other Catholic Laborites in postwar Canberra, he came into contact with the Melbourne anti-communist activist, B. A. Santamaria.

Chifley led the ALP to defeat at the hands of Menzies in the December 1949 election. On becoming opposition leader, he appointed a new private secretary drawn from the ranks of the public service. His choice was Byrne.

Byrne loved working for Chifley. The opposition leader was incredibly courteous and considerate. Byrne drafted letters and documents secure in the knowledge that, once approved, all official correspondence would be signed and dispatched expeditiously. A qualified accountant, Byrne appreciated the care with which Chifley used taxpayers' money.

However, all idylls must end and Byrne's great moment of public fulfillment ended abruptly on June 30, 1951, when Dr H. V. Evatt became opposition leader following Chifley's death.

Byrne stayed on as a member of the leader's personal staff, but working for Evatt was not as enjoyable as working for Chifley. While Evatt's legal expertise was undoubted, he lacked people skills. He was irascible where Chifley had been calm. Evatt's office was dysfunctional. His correspondence was chronically in a mess. Documents were never signed even though an unsleeping Evatt worked round the clock.

Byrne was able to keep working for Evatt because, basically, the two men were on the same political wavelength. The discreet public servant in him should have made Byrne wary of getting involved in factional matters, but he got involved nonetheless given his connection with the right-wing figure, Santamaria. At one stage, requests for information from Santamaria's people in Melbourne arrived in Canberra via Byrne's home in Turner.

The connection with Santamaria hardly counted against Byrne at first because Evatt himself, for factional reasons, was aligned with Labor's anti-communist wing. He was ready to do a deal with Santamaria.

So, with Evatt aligned with the Labor Right, Byrne was very much a mainstream Labor figure in Canberra. He became senior vice-president of the local ALP branch. He helped to prevent the controversial Dr John Burton from gaining preselection for the ACT seat. In 1953, he was elected to serve as an ALP member of the ACT Advisory Council. In the following year, he gave an official radio broadcast to mark the centenary of the Eureka stockade.

In October 1954, a distraught Evatt, having lost a supposedly unlosable federal election earlier that year, did an abrupt about-face. He denounced Santamaria and his followers as a canker in the ALP's ranks. They were blamed for his defeat.

This overnight lurch to the left made Byrne's position untenable. In February 1955, with Labor teetering on the brink of an historic split, he left Evatt's staff and returned to a substantive position in the Trade Department.

Byrne exited from Evatt's office in possession of a valuable piece of information. He knew that one of the many unsigned documents in Evatt's overflowing in-tray was an application to renew his ALP membership. Strictly speaking, if Evatt did not renew his membership in time, he had no right to lead the federal parliamentary Labor Party.

A bizarre if utterly serious factional manoeuvre quickly ensued. In the wake of Byrne's departure, anti-Evatt circles in the ALP's Canberra branch were abuzz with talk that, in all likelihood, Evatt had failed to renew his party membership. Officials in the hostile NSW branch of the ALP called for him to be removed as federal leader for this reason.

It took a hasty intervention from the federal executive to end the sudden crisis. Evatt was issued with a new party ticket, though this action required much lobbying. Such was the chaos that gripped the ALP in the wake of Evatt's denunciation of Santamaria.

Byrne's connection with the ALP outlasted the painful break with Evatt. He continued to be elected as a Labor member of the Advisory Council. In 1960, he became its chairman. He pushed, if unsuccessfully, for the people of the ACT to be granted self-government.

Byrne served in the Advisory Council until he stood down in 1964. By this time, the local ALP in Canberra was undergoing a steady drift to the left. The successful ALP candidates in the council election of 1964 included Gordon Walsh, who later emerged as the focus of opposition to the preselection of Canberra's long-serving federal MP, Jim Fraser.

The Labor Left superseded Byrne in the 1960s but, by living long and having a good memory, he managed to ensure that his side of the story could not be forgotten. In his later years, researchers came to esteem his unrivalled first-hand knowledge of personalities and events in the era of Chifley and Evatt. To younger people, these past political leaders might merely be names in history textbooks, but to him they were actual people he had known and worked with in Canberra. Speaking to him about them was a wondrous form of time travelling.

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