

Enid Lyons – The Woman who had Everything

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Anne Henderson

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A wit name Mignon McLaughlin once quipped: “Women are afraid of mice and of murder, and of very little in between.”

It is one particular woman that I am going to speak of today. A woman who became a leading Australian in her day – and one not afraid to tackle (in print) even her disagreements with Sir Robert Menzies, with whom she had worked closely in parliament. That woman is Dame Enid Lyons.

Margaret Whitlam once described Enid Lyons as an undaunted woman. And women of courage have interested me over years of writing books.

Enid Lyons has been largely forgotten in Australian history – perhaps because her story is just too amazing to fully appreciate. Dame Enid Lyons – a woman who became undaunted enough to take the stage in a man’s world. A woman who was born to itinerant parents and whose mother ensured her daughters would be well educated. A woman who married as a girl, gave birth to twelve children and managed to become not only a stateswoman but a commentator in her own right, broadcaster and author.

Eleanor Roosevelt once outlined her rules for campaign behaviour for wives: “Always be on time. Do as little talking as humanly possible. Lean back in the parade car so everybody can see the president.”

Today the term power couple is increasingly familiar and relevant – examples like Bill and Hilary Clinton, Barack and Michelle Obama, Malcolm and Lucy Turnbull. Partnership in politics has taken off.

But Australia had its first power couple a lot earlier – Prime Minister Joe Lyons and his wife Enid dominated politics in Australia during the 1930s.

Joe Lyons’ death, suddenly, in 1939 – the first Australian PM to die in office – shocked a nation. So popular had Joe Lyons been as PM, a man who had defied the sectarianism of his times to become the first Catholic conservative Australian Prime Minister, his burial stopped a nation for most of a week.

Joe Lyons, acting treasurer in the Scullin Labor Government in 1930, was no ordinary bloke. Although he had the charisma of one – coming from a middle class family that lost everything when his father gabled the family livelihood on a Melbourne Cup. Joe Lyons worked his way to the top, from penury through education and teaching to politics. He knew the common man from his Tasmanian background and communicated easily with all manner of people.

As acting federal Labor treasurer in 1930, Lyons had stood up to caucus and refused to let Australia default on its loan repayments. Soon after he left Labor and joined the conservatives and within a year had become Prime Minister. That was in

1931 – a time with many echoes today.

The financial meltdown that came in 1929 brought the Lyons and Menzies families (Labor and non Labor) into political allegiance – and, in time, would go on to forge a unique outcome in the history of Australia's non Labor parties.

It's a history that both sides of politics - Labor and Liberal - have chosen to ignore for too long. And, if Australia's political history is to be fully acknowledged, it is a history that should be adequately documented by both parties - and accepted.

THE DEPRESSION CONVERSION

As you would all know, the crisis of 1929-31 came at a time of Labor rule in Canberra. In late 1930, after the Wall Street crash, the newly installed Scullin government faced the repayment of a £28 million loan with British banks.

Radical Labor voices in caucus – including John Curtin - argued the loan repayment should be delayed, in other words the loan agreement be repudiated, or not paid when due. Acting Labor treasurer Joe Lyons argued that such an action would be financially reprehensible – and global suicide for a small trading nation like Australia.

What followed was – for Australia at the time – something almost as dramatic as the Washington bailout of Wall Street financial institutions in 2008. But, unlike the taxpayers of the US today, the financial backing for the move came from private investors large and small.

In a move that was as bold as it was unique, Labor's acting treasurer Joe Lyons, in collaboration with a young Robert Menzies – then a Nationalist member of the Victorian parliament – and Staniforth Ricketson of JB Were, over some weeks, raised some £30 million from citizens and investors in a government scheme to re finance that overseas loan.

Credit confidence in Australia was renewed. All as a result of combined efforts by Labor and non Labor operatives. It made Joe Lyons a national figure. Even, as time would prove, an international figure.

The loan conversion brought Lyons and Menzies and a number of senior figures in finance and conservative politics in Victoria into collaboration.

In the months that followed the loan conversion, divisions in the Labor caucus continued. In late January 1931, Scullin reappointed Theodore to the Treasury position.

Lyons became further disenchanted with Labor's inflationary moves and, eventually, with a handful of five Labor MPs he resigned from the government to sit on the crossbenches. Joe Lyons continued his contact with his non Labor associates, namely those who had helped bring about the loan conversion. Meanwhile the pressure was on him to consider joining the conservatives in parliament.

ENID LYONS

But there was one other figure of utmost importance in all this - Joe's wife Enid Lyons.

At crucial moments, both with the loan conversion and as he made his decision to leave Labor, Lyons would look to Enid for back-up. As the tensions in the Labor caucus over the loan repayment reached a zenith in 1930, Joe Lyons found himself defying Labor's radicals in caucus. Enid Lyons remarked to a journalist at the time, "If he had done anything else I should have been ashamed of him."

Enid Lyons had married Joe at seventeen when he was a Treasurer in the Tasmanian Government and 18 her senior. The story of their romance would make a movie – scandalous today with the Minister for Education (as Joe also was) courting a teacher trainee half his age. They married in April 1915, just as the Gallipoli Campaign began.

By early 1931 they had a family of nine children. By the time they were living in the Lodge they were the parents of 11.

But Enid was no housefrau. From early in her marriage she had worked with Joe and travelled with him to political meetings.

Encouraged by her husband to be part of his political life, Enid had just missed winning a state seat for Labor in 1925 when Joe was Tasmanian premier. She was an integral part of his campaigns over years.

Joe and Enid Lyons were a power couple long before the term became fashionable.

Joe Lyons had realised early in his career how women voters could be a political plus for him. When married, he used Enid on stage to draw out the issues women wanted to hear in an otherwise male dominated process. Enid loved the stage.

While never one to thrust herself forward and often recalling that her legs would be like jelly as she approached the platform, Enid became a most entertaining and accomplished figure once she began a speech. She was funny, surprising and unpretentious. Her years of elocution practice with her ambitious mother stood her in good stead. And she became a natural at repartee – having watched Joe, a master at it, over years in political campaigns.

It was during the months of 1931 while Joe contemplated joining the conservative side of politics that Enid met Robert Menzies at the Menzies home. She was immediately attracted to Pattie Menzies but came away with a less than satisfactory impression of Robert Menzies whom she found to be of the dominant male type, as she would write in her memoirs.

This was hardly surprising. Joe Lyons had always encouraged Enid into the world of men – or public life - as an equal. And her mother Eliza was a woman who took an active part in public affairs. Eliza's activities in Labor politics in Tasmania had been the reason Joe and Enid had met.

Enid Lyons had had a very modern introduction to adult life as a woman. After her marriage, her role was at all times to support her husband – domestically and politically. But she had also been encouraged both at home and by her husband to take a stand as a public figure.

Enid quite astutely gauged in her first meeting with Robert Menzies that he preferred wives to take a back seat. Echoing this, Pattie Menzies once spoke of how there would be unhappiness in a marriage if both husband and wife were both “political at the prime ministerial level”. No doubt this was true in the Menzies marriage, but Joe Lyons was a very different sort of male from Robert Menzies. Today Joe Lyons would be tagged a Sensitive New Age Guy. And judging by the way wives are now very much part of US political podiums, Joe Lyons was a SNAG well ahead of his time.

JOINING THE CONSERVATIVES

In April 1931, Joe and Enid Lyons became a national phenomenon. They were the focus of citizens groups springing up across the eastern seaboard. These groups, seemingly politically unaligned but often backed by leading figures in conservative ranks, wanted change in Canberra. They were made up of tens of thousands of ordinary citizens who saw opposition to radical Labor as weak at a federal level.

These groups were closely aligned with the conservative side of politics – Staniforth Ricketson for example helped to set up the Victorian Citizens League in February 1931 and within three months it had 80,000 members. Keith Murdoch, the wealthy media magnate of the day, was also interested in publicising the protest of such groups in his newspapers.

With Joe Lyons now somewhere between the major political parties and also the national figure who had spearheaded the seemingly non partisan loans conversion, it was soon evident that Lyons was the man to take the politics of the citizens movements to another level.

Backers for an extraordinary series of addresses that April by Joe and Enid Lyons in Town Halls from Adelaide to Melbourne and then to Sydney – with stops at regional towns along the way – included Ricketson, Murdoch and Robert Menzies. The meetings were widely reported in the press and a groundswell of citizen opposition to the handling of the economic downturn by Labor was underway. Joe Lyons and Enid Lyons were cheered again and again as heroes – Enid, as well as Joe, spoke at the podium.

Her presence was so popular Robert Menzies began to fear she would take some of the limelight from Joe and in Melbourne he asked her to merely give the vote of thanks. She was cheered loudly nonetheless – with some calling out that she was “Queen of Australia”.

On 7 May 1931, a new conservative party was declared – the United Australia Party. Its name captured the aspirations of the troubled citizens leagues. Joe Lyons became leader as John Latham stepped aside. The UAP was a party that crossed political divides; a non-Labor party with a Catholic at its helm – an historic first.

In Joe Lyons’ move away from Labor, Enid Lyons was quite an influence. Her own political persuasion had been Labor, developed out of a Labor family. But, as the Lyons couple became increasingly disenchanted with federal Labor, it was Enid who most readily could accept membership of the conservative opposition.

Enid Lyons was always something of a Fabian – what one might call a small “I” Liberal. Her allegiance was not so much to the organisation as to the policy she believed in. The only organisation which would completely hold her allegiance throughout her life was the Catholic church. Raised a Methodist, Enid had studied the Catholic faith before her marriage to Joe Lyons and converted.

Enid could see things more pragmatically. Joe's jump when he made it had a lot to do with Enid's common sense and belief in Joe rather than the tribe they were leaving or the tribe they were joining.

This relative independence of mind has, I think, been responsible for leaving the Lyons political couple, especially Joe Lyons, without champions as the decades have passed. Labor has failed to acknowledge Joe Lyons as one of their own over two decades; and a Labor man ahead of his time with his pragmatic sense of economic responsibility and readiness to stand strong against the potential disaster of radical ideas from some in the Labor caucus.

For Liberals, Joe Lyons was left to disappear in the shadow of Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies, in spite of Enid Lyons' great contribution to the party's early years. It had been Joe Lyons who had encouraged Robert Menzies to move to federal politics in 1934 and for almost half a decade Menzies worked closely with Joe Lyons as Attorney General.

THAT WOMAN

In the 1930s, for a professional man of Menzies' capabilities, Enid Lyons defied the norm and challenged comfort zones. But so long as Joe and Enid Lyons were the power couple in the Lodge Menzies had to acknowledge their genius for winning elections.

In so many ways Enid Lyons and Robert Menzies were like chalk and cheese. She had the instinctive ability to move thousands with a few words; he was what Enid described fondly on the day of his death such “a well furnished lawyer”.

Enid Lyons also remains a conundrum for feminists. Robert Menzies might have warned them.

So often today, young women are told they cannot have it all, that parenting and a public life are too difficult to manage at the one time. But Enid Lyons did just this, marrying at seventeen, having 12 children and rearing eleven to adulthood and, after 1939, as a single parent.

- She would stand for parliament at the age of 27, while the mother of seven.
- As the spouse of a Tasmanian Labor premier and later a conservative prime minister she would become known as an important public speaker in her own right.
- As the single mother of eleven, still educating five of her children, she would become the first woman to win a seat in the House of Representatives, and this in spite of a landslide loss federally for her party at that election.

And if you are exhausted listening to all this, Enid Lyons would go on to

- become the first woman in an Australian Cabinet, in 1949,
- sit on the ABC Board for over a decade, and
- rally a huge fan club as a radio broadcaster and syndicated twice weekly columnist for some three years.

But this was also an ordinary woman in many aspects of her life; as a mother, she could not imagine being without a baby; she became a good little housewife, enjoying her kitchen, covering chairs and sofas, sewing her children's clothes.

She was a tireless supporter of her husband and allowed him to go after his ambitions, however much it gave her own life new burdens. Yet, in all of this, Enid Lyons would somehow become extraordinary.

In so many areas of her life story, Enid Lyons did not set out to chart the course her life took. She was instinctive rather than strategic, and surrounded by action not of her making – challenges that came to her in out-of-the ordinary circumstances and which she rose to meet.

For Robert Menzies this was a puzzle. When Joe and Enid Lyons made their first trip abroad in 1935, Menzies joined the prime ministerial team – paying his and Pattie Menzies' fares to join the prime ministerial entourage. It was also a first trip abroad for Pattie and Robert Menzies. The prime ministerial team made a happy group at sea. Meanwhile the youngest Lyons children were looked after at the Lodge by Mavis Lyons – the wife of Joe's younger brother Tom – and one of the older Lyons' daughters.

Enid had been asked by Keith Murdoch to write regular columns for his newspapers of her impressions while abroad. She would have plenty to record. Her travels had much to enchant the women back home.

But when Robert Menzies heard of this he offered his secretary Mr Stirling to help Enid write her columns; Menzies used the lawyers' phrase "devilling". Enid declined. She had faith in her writing. What's more, her writing style was what readers liked. Enid wrote with emotion and personality – something the well furnished lawyer could not quite appreciate at the time.

This was also true of her speaking – and that of Joe Lyons. They could tug the emotions and empathies of enormous crowds of ordinary people. Enid Lyons once wrote that if only the young Bob Menzies had inserted a couple of platitudes into his very erudite speeches he would have been a far better at winning over voters. This lack of warmth and empathy in Menzies public utterances was one very strong reason his colleagues feared he was not ready for leadership in 1938.

THE WIDOW

Joe Lyons' death on 7 April 1939 while prime minister shocked the nation. It came after months of party division and global tension up to and following the Munich Agreement with Hitler in September 1938. Joe Lyons was under extreme pressure and his heart weak.

But the lead up to his death saw fracture in conservative ranks. Robert Menzies' speech to the Constitutional Club in Sydney in October 1938 was reported as being

an attack on Joe Lyons' weak leadership. In his speech, Menzies had held up Mussolini and Hitler as examples of strong leadership in contrast to leadership in Australia. Enid, reading the morning newspapers at the Lodge, urged Joe to take it up with Menzies. Joe reacted more benignly; he did not believe Menzies was making an attack on him. Then, in March 1939, Menzies resigned from Cabinet and threw the Lyons Government into semi-meltdown.

Years later Enid Lyons would record a balanced account of her feelings surrounding her husband's death and the events leading up to it. She was angry over the Constitutional Club speech but never directly blamed Robert Menzies for Joe Lyons' death. In fact, Enid sent a warm, congratulatory telegram to Menzies when he was eventually elected leader by just one vote against the aging Billy Hughes after Joe's death. In public and private recordings, Enid Lyons was exemplary – as was Robert Menzies. But she did admit in her memoirs to never having voted for Menzies as leader – owing to the emotions she felt at the circumstances leading to Joe's death.

Among the Lyons children, naturally, there was much ill feeling at the loss of their father. Peter Lyons – born in 1931 - remembers a visit Robert Menzies made to the family home in Devonport when Menzies was prime minister and Peter was a young adult. Peter would not go up to the house because he still believed Robert Menzies had killed his father. He does not hold that view today.

THE MP

Enid Lyons defied all expectations at the federal election in 1943. It was an election when John Curtin and Labor won a landslide victory. But, in northern Tasmania, Enid Lyons scraped home on preferences to win the seat of Darwin for the UAP – in spite of standing against two men from her own party, two Labor candidates, a Communist and an independent.

Her temerity and willingness to have a go were Enid Lyons' lifelong gifts. And by the time she stood for federal parliament she had long years of experience of campaigning for Joe.

In late 1943, Enid Lyons became the bright light on Menzies' horizon. Her move to parliament captured national media attention for the conservative side of politics.

That a conservative woman had made it to the House where the PM sat was a landmark occasion. Menzies seemed ready at this point to assume the leadership again after years of ambivalence about politics.

At a time of deep set back for the non Labor parties, strangely the federal election of 1943 marked the beginning of the comeback. Within two years, the Liberal Party of Australia would take shape. Enid Lyons would serve notably as a member of Menzies party for some eight years and be appointed a member of cabinet after the 1949 election.

MEMOIRS

The Menzies-Lyons relationship was always one of respect more so than affection. Joe Lyons certainly had a warm regard for Robert Menzies and had recognised his potential from the first. He did believe Menzies had the capacity to take the

leadership. But, by the late 1930s, the UAP was a nest of competing egos. In addition, Robert Menzies and Country Party leader Earle Page – who was very close to Lyons throughout the 1930s - distrusted one another.

After Joe Lyons' death there was baggage both Menzies and Enid Lyons would paper over in their exchanges. They were accomplished politicians both, but feelings were brittle between them. And as Menzies became more and more the accepted father of conservative politics, Joe Lyons' legacy became diminished.

Enid Lyons was a great believer in the written record. Wisely so.

It is also worth noting Enid Lyons' Labor roots here – coming from a party originally that values the printed word and history. Books on Labor heroes – however large or small – sell well and are read by Labor supporters. Labor keeps the faith – at times far too strictly – and knows its history.

In her two volumes of memoir, Enid Lyons left her story. In Among the Carrion Crows – a record of her years as an MP - she let a lot of air into what had passed between Menzies, herself and Joe Lyons in the months before Joe's death.

Here she wrote of her reaction to the Constitutional Club speech in 1938 and how she had been furious at what she saw as disloyalty from Menzies. She also intended her book to set the record straight as to Joe Lyons' strengths as a leader – for too long she believed his memory had been clouded by the views of his rivals, men who had no understanding of his conciliatory approach to politics and his ability to keep a team united in tough times. Such qualities are only better understood decades later.

Word leaked out that Enid Lyons was writing her view of controversial moments in the Menzies-Lyons relationship well ahead of her book's publication. Enid had written to thank Menzies a few years earlier when his own book Afternoon Light had been published and she had thanked him for his fulsome words of praise for Joe.

In March 1972, as the press came sniffing for advance warning of her book's contents, Enid contacted Menzies who was recovering from a stroke in the Mercy Hospital in Melbourne.

What followed was an exchange between the two stalwarts of 1940s politics. With her letter, Enid attached a draft of her chapter on Joe and Menzies. Menzies replied giving reasons for his actions. He had disagreed with the dumping of the national insurance legislation which he had promised his electorate would be passed during a close election in 1937 when he had come within an ace of losing Kooyong, and his speech to the Constitutional Club had been a generic cry to all leaders in Australia, himself included, not an attack on Joe Lyons.

In her book Among The Carrion Crows, Enid Lyons included their correspondence in an afterword. And there it stayed.

LEGACY

Robert Menzies did assume the leadership of the UAP in April 1939 – in spite of Earle Page's attempts to spoil his chances. He led the UAP to a narrow victory in

1940 but never looked settled as Prime Minister. He did indeed appear to be unready for leadership, handing over the prime ministership to Arty Fadden of the Country Party in August 1941. John Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941 when the conservative coalition lost the numbers in the House. These were dark days for Australian conservatives.

In many ways, when you look at it, Enid Lyons' triumph in the 1943 federal election against the odds restored a sense of conservative pride in their chances. In the Lyons way, she seems to have showed her leaders something of a way back. By 1949 a new conservative force had been reshaped as the Liberal Party and in December won government. Bob Menzies and Enid Lyons, despite their differences, remained a team.

Enid Lyons was irrepressible. She suffered indifferent health throughout her life but never refused a jump. After becoming the first female appointed to a federal cabinet in 1949, she was forced to retire in early 1951 after slow recovery from the aftermath of a major operation prevented her from the performance she believed was needed.

In political retirement, she became a twice weekly columnist for Keith Murdoch's tabloids and occasional broadcaster. She was a member of the ABC Board for over ten years. And she wrote three books.

One of her most memorable moments happened a few years before she died in 1981, aged 84. Invited to Canberra, she found herself spending time with the newly elected female prime minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher.

Before she died, she arranged for her Home Hill - the house in Devonport that she and Joe had built as newly weds and extended and rebuilt many times - would become a museum.

Ahead of her time, and ahead of all other Prime Ministers and their families, Enid Lyons established a legacy for future generations. Her home and her lovely collections can still be viewed very much as they were all those years ago when the sounds of noisy children ran through the rooms.