

ORATION BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE HANDING OVER TO
THE BATHURST CITY COUNCIL OF THE COTTAGE OF J.B. CHIFLEY,
BATHURST 24 MARCH 1973

It is a profound measure of weight and force of Ben Chifley's personality that of the 14 Australian Prime Ministers now dead, he is outstandingly the one whose memory is clearest and strongest in the hearts and minds of his countrymen. The Chifley legend - I use the word in its nobler sense - has a force and meaning, even for the new generation which never knew him. Each of us will have our own opinion about who was the greatest of Australian Prime Ministers. I venture to suggest, however, that there would be no dispute as to who was the best loved.

One of the sources of Chifley's ability to inspire affection was the simplicity of his life style. This cottage - his only real home in or out of office - symbolised it. That is not to say that Chifley was a simple man. He had inner reserves and an outer reserve which sprang from a character of great complexity. There was a very private Chifley unknown to the public, known perhaps not entirely even to his closest colleagues. For all his great warmth, for all his easy fellowship, for all the loyalty and love his inspires, he was in fact never "one of the boys". In this sense there was another Chifley - apart, above, even - dare one say it - aloof.

So great is the hold of the Chifley memory on the Australian Labor Party that it is usually forgotten how untypical of Labor leaders he actually was; paradoxically he has become the archetype for our leadership. There is something naturally very appealing to the Party in the rise of an engine driver to Prime Minister; yeat of the 11 of us who have led the Parliamentary Labor Party, only he and Matthew Charlton fit the classic type. So in this, as in so many other ways, Chifley was in a class of his own.

It is a great thing for us all to be here at Ben Chifley's home - not just this cottage but in this city which was so very much his city. It is a very moving thing for me to be here as the first Labor Prime Minister of Australia since Chifley. For us all, for the Australian Labor Party, Bathurst holds a very special meaning at his birthplace, his only real home; among the people who shared with him the bitterness and frustrations of the thirties, the victories and achievements of the forties. He was a Bathurst man through and through. He used to say "No Chifley ever left Bathurst except feet first". He did leave Bathurst to give on the national scale the same service that he had, for so many years, given Bathurst in local affairs. But it was to this city and the people of this city that he always returned and did return to his last rest.

It is saddening to find that after 22 years his grave has fallen into disrepair. When we looked into the matter we found there was no machinery available to fulfil what is clearly a national responsibility and should be a national charge, so I have decided that henceforth the Australian Government shall assume responsibility for maintaining the graves of all former Prime Ministers and I have asked my colleague Don Willesee, the Special Minister of State, to make the necessary arrangements.

It is fitting that monuments and memorials of our great should be preserved and cared for. We are not so rich in the memorabilia of history that we can afford to allow them to be lost or neglected. I congratulate all those who have worked for the preservation of this cottage. Nonetheless, Chifley's lasting memorial lies in what he achieved for his nation and he himself has his true resting place in the hearts of his countrymen. Those monuments are imperishable; that place cannot be moved.
