On 22 May 1942, Robert Gordon Menzies, then a backbench conservative MP in the Australian Federal parliament, briefly Prime Minister 1940-41, yet to lead the creation of the Liberal Party in 1944/45 from an amalgam of conservative forces, stewing over the decline of his political fortunes and the darkness of socialism overshadowing the Curtin Labour Government then leading the nation’s war effort, delivered a 15 minute radio address. This has become known as the ‘Forgotten People’ speech, an iconic moment in hagiographic histories of Australian conservatism.

In it he exalted the ‘forgotten people’, those hard working “great and sober and dynamic” middle-class Australians, “salary-earners, shopkeepers, skilled artisans, professional men and women, farmers, and so on”, who placed family, God, hearth and home at the centre of their lives, essentially alone, unprotected and not helped by the powerful trade union movement.

It was to these ‘forgotten people’, and what he saw as their ‘national patriotism’, and ‘spirituality’, that Menzies would hitch his political future to, promising a free enterprise future in a society in which there would be “more law, not less; more control, not less”.

In May 2017, seventy-five years later, conservatives gathered in Canberra for an Anniversary dinner to commemorate this speech. It was hailed by acolytes as “the greatest oration in Australian political history”, the speech that “laid the philosophical foundation of the Liberal Party of Australia (and) defined post-war Australia”.

It is a cosy feel-good story about the Liberal Party, obscuring much about the Party, its ideology, and the politics of conservative icon Menzies. For the latter we need to go back a few years......

From late April 1938 through to early August, Attorney-General Menzies went on a lengthy tour of Europe. His itinerary included Nazi Germany, where the German Foreign Office was placed at his service. In private, as even his friendly biographers have to admit, Menzies regarded Hitler as a political dreamer, a man with many good ideas. In Germany, Menzies met with many Reich identities, including the polite and genial Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, President of the Reichsbank, the economic fixer significantly responsible for stitching the deals and links between Hitler and German banking and industrial interests that helped put the Nazis in power.

Since the Enabling Act of 1933, anti-semitism, fear, intimidation, incarcerations, torture, had been loosed upon the German people, the labour movement broken along with organised opposition, and the propagandist brilliance of Dr Josef Goebbels deployed to cultivate and groom compliance, cooperation and a love for the nation state and its leadership. By 1938, for Hitler and his party it was almost mission accomplished. Outside of Germany, the term ‘concentration camp’ was known and referenced in some mainstream media outlets and in leftist literature, some of the latter joining the extensive list of 5000 publications banned in Australia during the 1930s.
Before he left Europe to head home for Australia, a wistful Menzies issued a press release in which he said there “is a good deal of a real spiritual quality in the willingness of young Germans to devote themselves to the service and well-being of the State”.

In a private letter to his sister at the same time, he was a bit more expansive, writing that “The Germans may be pulling down the Churches, but they have erected the State, with Hitler at its head, into the sort of religion which produces a spiritual exaltation that one cannot but admire and some small portion of which would do no harm among our own somewhat irresponsible population”.

Back home, in an address to a luncheon gathering of Old Melburnians on 14 November 1938, Menzies expressed sympathy for the territorial aspirations of Germany; he told of how impressed he was by Germany’s industrial efficiency; and he returned to his spiritual mantra, describing as a positive “the exalted and almost spiritual worship of the State by many Germans”. Personally, he told his audience, he looked forward to a system of democracy where we “can have real discipline and real efficiency and real cooperation”. It was a message he numerous repeated to small friendly gatherings during in the following weeks.

Soon he demonstrated how this could be done. In December Port Kembla waterside workers on the South Coast of NSW protested against Japan’s invasion of China and the bloody horrors that were unfolding. They banned the export of pig-iron to Japan from their port, arguing it was a strategic materiel to an aggressive and expansionist Japan, and that in the near future Australia could well be on the receiving end of its militarist/expansionist agenda.

As Attorney General, Menzies vigorously retaliated, implementing the draconian provisions of the Transport Workers Act. The wharfies stood their ground, until forced back to work in early 1939, in the process christening Menzies with the lifelong scarifying nickname ‘Pig-Iron Bob’. As Menzies explained to readers of the Argus, 22 December 1938, the Port Kembla workers were trying to influence Australian foreign policy towards Japan, a friendly trade partner, and they had no right to do this. In a democracy, a citizen’s democratic involvement began and ended at the ballot box. The “essence of democracy”, he explained, “is that obedience should be rendered to government founded upon a popular vote”.

Eminent Australian jurist Sir Isaac Isaacs, and a former Governor-General of Australia, had other ideas. In 1939 in support of the Port Kembla wharfies, he explained that in a democracy, the law could be used to bind people to immoralities, compelling them to act against their consciences, and that when this arose and it became a matter of conscience above the law, then people had the right to act accordingly. To demand otherwise, he explained, was “Dictator’s rule”. But Isaacs’ constitutional understanding was not part of Menzies’ weltanschauung.

Menzies was not alone in the period between the wars in regarding Hitler sympathetically as a political dreamer and a man of vision. It was an affection shared by many other Australians, and in other democracies, amongst the rich and powerful and a galaxy of anti-socialists and anti-trade unionists. But it is something that acolytes of Menzies prefer not to acknowledge. And during the long rule of Menzies as Prime Minister (1950-1966), hagiographers airbrush ‘Ming the Merciless’ (check Flash Gordon for this derisive moniker) and his comprehensive Cold War plans to deploy the armed forces against militant unionism; his use of ASIO, militarised under his administration, as a political police force; and his plans to put communists in internment camps.
While the 1942 ‘forgotten people’ radio talk by Menzies is celebrated by conservatives as a centrepiece in the Liberal Party foundation story and as the bedrock of its faith and vision, the 1938 ‘forgotten address’ is closer to the party’s realpolitik past, present, and no doubt future.

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June 2017