Joseph Benedict CHIFLEY, PC

Prime Minister 13 July 1945 to 19 December 1949

- Ben Chifley became the 16th prime minister after a brief interregnum by Frank Forde following the death of John Curtin in office on 5 July 1945.

  Member of the Locomotive Engine-drivers, Firemens and Cleaners Association 1916; Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen 1920-1931.

- Member of the Australian Labor Party.

- Member in the House of Representatives for Macquarie (NSW) 1928-1931, 1940-1951. Minister for Defence 1931-1932. Treasurer and member of Curtin's War Cabinet 1941-44. Minister for Post-war Reconstruction 1942-1945. Prime Minister and Treasurer, 1945-1949.

- Chifley's government fell after the Liberal Party, under Robert Menzies, won the 1949 election.

Main achievements (1945-1949)

- Ensured Australia's wartime economy was managed effectively and post-war debts were minimised. His government has been described as one of Australia's most creative. It balanced economic development and welfare support with restraint and regulation and provided the framework for Australia's post-war economic prosperity.

- Introduced significant post-war legislation, which included the Banking and Commonwealth Bank Acts of 1945. This gave government control over monetary policy and established Commonwealth Bank as Australia's national bank.

- The 'father' of Australia's Holden car, he personally sponsored plan by General Motors-Holden Ltd to manufacture the first locally-made motorcar as the basis for Australia's industrial and defence development.

- Established the Australian National University 1946, National Welfare Fund 1947, Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1947.

- Implemented Australia's massive post-war immigration programme. Inaugurated the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme (1946). Established Trans-Australia Airlines to compete with private airlines. Converted Qantas Empire Airways Ltd to state-owned overseas airline.

- Established Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (1949) in response to British pressure to create an Australian counter-intelligence agency.

- Supported independence campaigns in South-East Asia, and argued for economic assistance to contain communism in the region.

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Personal life

- Born 22 September 1885 in Bathurst, NSW. Died 13 June 1951 in Canberra.

- Initially attended a bush school, then Patrician Brothers' High School in Bathurst. Worked as a cashier's assistant in Bathurst, then as shop boy, cleaner, and railways fireman. Studied at night classes run by Workers Educational Association and Bathurst Technical School. An avid reader. Graduated as first-class locomotive engine driver at 28 (1914), the youngest in NSW.

- Instructor at Bathurst Railway Institute, renowned Rugby Union player, boxer and cricketer. Honed his advocacy skills in industrial tribunals. Chair of Bathurst hospital committee (1937-44) and member of Abercrombie Shire Council (1933-47).

- On 6 June 1914 in Sydney, he married Elizabeth McKenzie, a non-Catholic, defying the Papal decree, *ne temere* (effective from 1908), which forbade Catholics from marrying outside the Church.

Life after politics

- Leader of the Opposition 1949-1951. Suffered a heart attack in 1950 and, after a slow recovery, died of a massive heart attack on 13 June 1951 whilst parliamentarians attended State Ball at Parliament House. Buried at Bathurst cemetery with one wreath inscribed 'Ben, from Elizabeth' on his coffin.

Character

- Variously remembered as intelligent, dependable, charming, administratively capable, hard-working, a 'man of iron', slightly reserved though friendly, dignified. A shrewd political campaigner and negotiator. Cautious and conservative in financial matters, advocating 'vigorous self-denial'. Consultative but decisive. A 'splendid memory for people, facts and idiosyncrasies', adept at recalling anecdotes 'which he used to good effect'. A devoted husband. *Chifley…had a logical mind but he humanized all his thinking, even on politics…He understood the human heart, the ideals, the ambitions, the follies and the passions of men and women. Chifley put tolerance amongst the highest virtues, and he had it in large measure himself* (Source: Oliver Hogue, cited in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 13, 1993, p 420)

Did you know?

- Advocated arbitration rather than industrial action, and supported Conciliation and Arbitration Court. Regarded industrial discontent as central economic problem.

- Chifley's pipe became his trademark.

- Chifley announced the end of war with Japan on 15 August 1945.

- Chifley's grave is marked with an obelisk, with his words from 1951: 'If an idea is worth fighting for, no matter the penalty, fight for the right, and truth and justice will prevail'.

- The family home in Bathurst was opened by Prime Minister E.G. Whitlam in 1973 as a memorial to Chifley.

Sources

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Further reading

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