

Australian leadership: a values case study

THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET

OFFICIAL SELECTION for the 2008 Brisbane International Film Festival, Ronin Films, DVD 72 minutes, directed by Andrew Pike

The National Statement on Civics and Citizenship (Australian Government, 2005) encourages students to search for and clarify Australian identity. A ready access to Australian characteristics of successful leaders can be found in looking at the lives of our Prime Ministers, past and present. Their role and their example illustrate Australian identity more clearly than many a sociological treatise or post-modern cultural analysis.

The Chifleys of Busby Street is an oral history of Australia's post second world war prime minister and his wife told by those who knew them, lived alongside them in Bathurst and in Canberra. The film is non political in that it does not aim to elevate any party at the expense of another. Instead, the documentary shows the values by which Chifley became a well known, admired and liked leader at a difficult time in Australian post-war history (1945-1949).

What were those values? He was modest to the point that he took a room in Canberra's Kurrajong Hotel, eschewing any ostentation of office, inviting British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to drink tea with his office staff. Chifley and his wife Elizabeth never moved from a modest single story brick house in Busby Street in Bathurst that didn't even have hot running water in the kitchen.

He was motivated by a sense of social justice and equality that he earned while working for the Bathurst Railway Institute, and as chairman of Bathurst Hospital for several years before becoming a federal member. These experiences shaped his desire to help ordinary people, and his leadership style was at once personal, positive and constructive. His famous phrase *the light on the hill* (ALP Labor conference, 1949) gave inspiration to the Labor movement. Here is part of the quote:-

We have a great objective - the light on the hill - which we aim to reach by working the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. If the movement can make someone more comfortable, give to some father or mother a greater feeling of security for their children, a feeling that if a depression comes there will be work, that the government is striving its hardest to do its best, then the Labour movement will be completely justified.

It does not matter about persons like me who have our limitations. I only hope that the generosity, kindness and friendliness shown to me by thousands of my colleagues in the Labour movement will continue to be given to the movement and add zest to its work.

The film contrasts archival black and white material with color pictures of Bathurst in recent years and shows some dramatized excerpts from the play *A Local Man: A Play about Ben Chifley* by Bob Ellis (Currency Press, 2005) that is in period. These together

with the many interviews produce an emotional collage that is very moving without ever becoming hagiographic.

The documentary also frankly shows the final days of Chifley's leadership, when he moved against the workers who had elected him and lost support. There is no doubt that his achievements (The Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, the Holden, investment in CSIRO) outlasted his few shortcomings. This study by implication asks the viewer: what are today's values of our leaders, what exactly shapes their identity, and what values shape our lives?

A recent Australian Government identifies these core values and funds schools to develop values frameworks around them. These values are Care and Compassion, Integrity, Doing Your Best, Respect, A Fair Go, Responsibility, Freedom, Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion, Honesty and Trustworthiness. The Australian people also voted this government out of office in 2007 because they didn't see these values any longer exemplified in government decisions such as the corruption of the Australian Wheat Board or the treatment of refugees.

The Chifleys of Busby Street is an exemplary case study in Australian values that have not changed because of the passage of time: self-discipline, modesty, social justice, loyalty to the electorate, the plight of the common man and woman, these values permeate the curriculum of any Y or Ne[x]t Generation, and are not the exclusive monopolistic property of the First World war or baby boomer generation.

The Chifleys of Busby Street is G rated and strongly recommended for the civics and citizenship strand of the first mentioned statement as well as tailor-made for the ACT Curriculum Framework *Every chance to learn*. The Essential Learning Achievements Numbers 21 (*The student understands about Australians and Australia*) and 22 (*The student understands and values what it means to be a citizen in a democracy*) are well supported by this excellent documentary that should be in every school library proud of its collection.

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