Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2095

Henderson, Heather

(1928 -)

Born	19280803, Kew Victoria Australia
Occupation	Community Leader

Summary

Heather Henderson is the only daughter of former Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies and Dame Pattie Menzies. She was influential in the development of Australia's capital city, Canberra.

Details

The transformation of Canberra from a paddock of public servants to a functioning civic community owed much to the sense and daughterly persuasion of Heather Henderson, née Menzies.

Born in 1928, Heather is the only daughter of Sir Robert and Dame Pattie Menzies, and was from the beginning very much the apple of her father's eye. Unlike some offspring of politicians who often see little of their parents, Heather was a solid fixture in her father's routine, whether personal or political.

After initially turning down Joseph Lyon's invitation to join Cabinet in 1934 because he did not want to burden his family with long absences from their home in Melbourne, Menzies reconsidered and accepted the positions of Attorney General and Minister for Industry.

Heather's older brothers Kenneth and Ian were enrolled as boarders at Geelong College in 1936. While opportunities for the boys to see their parents were limited, Heather who had become a weekly boarder at Ruyton Girl's School, Kew, was able to enjoy home life more regularly.

In letters written during 1944-46 to Kenneth, who was serving with the AIF, Menzies wrote regular news of young Heather, by now a senior student at Ruyton. Very much a teenager, willowy, orthodontic bands and good at tennis, Heather was also already politically astute, as Menzies commented, 'her sotto voce comments in the galleries during speeches by such favourites as Forde and Ward and Evatt are really worth going a long way to hear'.[1]

Sir Alexander Downer, one of Menzies' ministers, observed how father and daughter seemed united by a 'mystical understanding' and assessed Heather as 'the principal joy' in Menzies' life during the period he knew him.

Despite her slim figure, she resembled him in facial features, sharing the same wit, incisiveness, some of his intolerances and, occasionally, that tongue which entertained audiences but sometimes lost friends [2]

Heather lived in Canberra for long periods during Menzies' two terms as Prime Minister in 1939-41 and 1949-66. She also accompanied her parents on overseas trips, including attending the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

Travelling with Sir Robert and Dame Pattie on an unofficial visit to Europe in 1948, Heather demonstrated her sensitivity in assessing British suffering in relation to postwar food rationing. In a letter to her brother Kenneth she described her surprise at the unexpectedly good meals they had been having:

Admittedly we've been mixing with the elite, & people with money are well fed. They can go for meals whenever they like & if they stay home they can afford to buy fruit and vegetables, which are dreadfully expensive . . . We have given a few tins of food away to maids . . . but we're quite convinced that the people who need it are the poor people – quite apart from the rationing everything is terribly expensive. I'm blowed if I know how they exist. [3]

Heather even entered the political lexicon of the day when, on one round trip including Washington, London and New Zealand in 1950, Menzies ferried a 'very special present' for his daughter, who was at the time studying music at Melbourne

University:

Its nature was a deep, dark secret and he wouldn't let us in on it, but the parcel, he explained, was 'enormous', so much so that it had to be specially looked out for at every stage of his many journeys. 'Heather's parcel' was, in fact, the subject of so much discussion by the members of the party that in the end it fell into line with the current trend for abbreviation, and by the time it reached New Zealand was referred to simply by all as 'H.P'.[4]

The mysterious 'H.P' was an evening dress, spectacular pink satin skirt and purple woollen top, purchased by Menzies in New York from a shop owned by a Mrs Livingston.

He often went there and bought something for my mother or me. He would look round and pick some poor girl who looked roughly my size, and got her to try on whatever he had selected. H.P. was one of those selections.

Heather was even more in the public eye in May 1955 when she wed Peter Henderson, then Third Secretary at the Australian Embassy in Djakarta. An estimated crowd of 2000, the largest mass of onlookers in Canberra since the 1954 Royal Tour, cheered the proceedings. Decreed by Sir Owen Dixon, Chief Justice of the High Court, in his toast to the bride and groom to be a 'nationally known' figure in her own right, the now Heather Henderson received a congratulatory cable from 'All your friends in the household' of Buckingham Palace.[5]

In January 1956, Heather Henderson's return to Canberra from Djakarta signalled a new period in her life as a married woman and acted as a catalyst for the development of the city. Canberra was still very much at the teething stage, possessing a meagre population of around 30,000, bereft of many basic facilities and lacking strongly defined social or structural cohesion.

This stretched and ragged city, divided by the Molonglo flood plain, offered very little in the way of suburban infrastructure. Assisting Heather on the home search front, Menzies was struck by the reality of life in Canberra, as opposed to the more sheltered view from The Lodge.

For Heather and Dame Pattie, even taking the baby for a walk proved difficult. The footpaths were poor or non-existent. A concerted campaign of family persuasion was launched on behalf of the capital: 'I continually complained to Dad and I'm sure I had an influence in changing his attitude to the city'. According to Eric Sparke's *Canberra*, the Chairman of the Public Service Board, Sir William Dunk, agreed with Heather's assertion, as quite suddenly he was being 'pushed around by the awakened Prime Minister with "Why this: Why not more of that? Who is responsible?"' [6]

Under Menzies' influence a Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry was set up to examine the situation – should Canberra remain a national capital in name only, or should it be developed? The Parliamentary Committee reported in favour of development. In 1958 the National Capital Development Commission was established and granted a charter 'to design, develop and construct Canberra as the National Capital of Australia'. Up until the time of his retirement some eight years later, Menzies displayed an active interest in the capital's progress.

Canberra at last began to develop a civic atmosphere and the individuality worthy of a national capital. Sir John Overall acknowledges Canberra's rebirth 'is a reflection of the farsightedness of Robert Gordon Menzies and his interest and enthusiasm in clearing the way and making it possible for Australia's young bush capital to be planned, developed and constructed to the status of a National Capital in the world scene'. [7]

Heather and Peter Henderson had four daughters. Peter was Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs from 1979 to 1984 and died in September 2016.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Edited Book
Letters to my daughter: Robert Menzies, letters, 1955-1975, Henderson, Heather, 2011

Book
Privilege and Pleasure, Henderson, Peter, Graham, Faithfull, 1986

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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