

BEN AND ELIZABETH CHIFLEY



Joseph Benedict Chifley, known to friends and public as Ben or Chif, was born in Bathurst on 22 September 1885.

Elizabeth Gibson McKenzie, Lizzie to friends, was born on 1 August 1886 only metres from No.10 Busby Street.

Following childhood on his grandfather's farm, Ben joined the railways at 17 and by 24 was its youngest first-class locomotive driver.

Elizabeth and Ben were married on 6 June 1914 Elizabeth McKenzie. His marriage to a Presbyterian presented Ben, a Catholic, with lifelong difficulties with his Church. Elizabeth's illness early in the marriage meant they did not have children. Fond of children, the couple gave special attention to nephews and nieces.

Ben soon became active in the Locomotive Enginemen's Association. Ben became more involved with politics after he was demoted to engine cleaner for his part in the 1917 railway strike. His study of economics along with his understanding of the needs of ordinary people meant his decision to enter parliamentary politics was a natural step. While always supportive, Elizabeth preferred to keep apart from the political life.

Ben Chifley was elected as the Labor candidate for Macquarie (which included Bathurst) in 1928. A bitter Labor faction war in the 1930s meant Chifley lost his seat. In 1933 he was elected to Abercrombie Shire Council, in which shire his home was located.

Chifley regained his parliamentary seat in the 1940 election and earned wide respect by capably handling Australia's wartime economy as treasurer in Curtin's government (1941-45).

Following Curtin's death in July 1945, Chifley became party leader and Prime Minister. Returned in the 1946 election, Chifley embarked on an ambitious program that shaped postwar Australia with increased immigration and improved social welfare as well as promotion of industrial and scientific development. Accomplishments included the Snowy Mountains Scheme and the Holden motorcar. Some policies, however, stirred controversy, for example the use of troops to break the coal miners' strike. Labor was defeated by Menzies' Liberal-Country Party coalition in 1949. Chifley became leader of the Opposition.

The house on Busby Street remained his quiet retreat during Ben Chifley's years in Parliament. He tried to make it home for the weekend at least once every fortnight. An evening phone call home was a daily ritual when Ben was in Canberra.

Ben Chifley suffered a fatal heart attack in his Canberra hotel room on 13 June 1951. He was given a State Funeral in Bathurst. Elizabeth continued to live in their home until her death there on 9 September 1962. Ben and Elizabeth are buried separately in Bathurst Cemetery in the Catholic and Presbyterian sections.