
THE AUSTRALIAN

Lady Anna Cowen's My Vice-Regal Life: diary of a true partner in public life

Sir Zelman Cowen and Lady Anna Cowen.

JOSH FRYDENBERG THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 7, 2017

The inscription to Zelman Cowen's autobiography *A Public Life* says it all: "To Anne". He knew that for all he achieved in public life, none of it would have been possible without the support of his wife of 66 years. Their marriage was a true partnership, based on an alignment of values, a deep well of mutual trust and respect, and a youthful love that blossomed over a lifetime.

Zelman couldn't speak of Anna — as she is known to her friends — without bringing a tear to his eye and often would say of his relationship "all this and heaven too". Anna was, in the words of her children, "the complete partner, an enabler".

This is why the publication of her diaries, *My Vice-Regal Life*, is so important, for it provides a rare glimpse into a challenging time in Australia's history. It is not a reflection written years after the event but a real-time recording of this important period.

The pages of Anna's diary spring to life with the people, places and pageantry of office. There is a record of Zelman's lunch with Anna and the Queen. There is a meal with Margaret Thatcher, Lord Mountbatten's funeral, conversations with houseguest Prince Charles and a state visit from Iran's teenage crown prince.

Senior figures in Australia's musical, artistic and scientific landscape turn up on the steps of Yarralumla including Sidney Nolan, Joan Sutherland and Macfarlane Burnet. Leading political figures feature, too: Don Dunstan, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Charles Court and Dick Hamer.

In office the Cowens had an incredible work ethic as they crisscrossed the country attending events from Tennant Creek to the Latrobe Valley, Hobart and Hahndorf.

It is clear from reading the diaries that the Cowens always made time for the Jewish community. When in Ballarat they visited the local synagogue, built in the 1860s, and attended numerous events including for the National Council of Jewish Women and the Jewish Ex-Servicemen's Organisation. The Cowens were not just prominent but very proud Jews, something they never sought to hide.

Anna's wit and humour is ever-present in the diaries. She writes of an investiture by Zelman where he waved a sword wildly around, saying it was remarkable they didn't have to pick up people's ears from the floor. There was also the time when Zelman and Anna visited the Melbourne showgrounds for the Centenary Sheep Show. Zelman found himself addressing a long list of sheep's backsides, only to impress them so much with his address that there was bleating from both ends.

But while Anna's humour and insight are always present, what is most obvious to the reader is how she so successfully turned Yarralumla into a warm and welcoming home. She introduced chickens into the garden to eat the scraps, would venture into the kitchen to make her favourite wholemeal bread, and always put visitors and staff at ease.

We must also remember that when Zelman assumed the governor-generalship, their four children were all at different yet sensitive stages of their development, including Ben, their youngest, who was only 11.

Anna's diaries are a wonderful, entertaining and poignant account of daily life during the Cowens' most successful and remarkable governor-generalship.

Anna was once asked how long it took her to get back to normal life after her time in Government House. "About 10 minutes," she replied. "But I don't think my feet ever left the ground during all those years in office." From reading *My Vice-Regal Life* it is easy to understand why.

My Vice-Regal Life: Diaries 1978 to 1982 by Lady Anna Cowen is out on July 17 (MUP, \$49.99).

Josh Frydenberg is the Minister for the Environment and Energy and launched *My Vice-Regal Life* in Melbourne on June 28.

FROM THE HOMEPAGE

Alleged Abbott assault: man charged ◆

JOE KELLY, PRIMROSE RIORDAN

A 38-year-old has been charged by police after allegedly headbutting former prime minister Tony Abbott in Hobart.

**Attack 'nothing to do with Yes'** ◆

JOE KELLY

George Brandis strongly rejects any link between the man who allegedly headbutted Tony Abbott and the SSM Yes campaign.

**Senators need another chamber** ◆

JACK THE INSIDER

I know this is one out of the box but maybe we should have a second Senate, filled with all the oddballs and weirdos we accidentally elected.

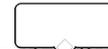
**Official Gillard artist chosen** ◆

MATTHEW WESTWOOD

One of Australia's most popular portrait artists, Vincent Fantauzzo, will paint Julia Gillard for Parliament House.

**N Korea Pacific H-bomb threat** ◆

North Korean foreign minister reportedly warns the regime may be preparing to test a hydrogen bomb in the Pacific.

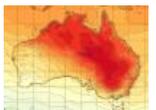
**'I'm not muddying the waters'** ◆

PRIMROSE RIORDAN

'The fact that people are complaining indicates they know damn well that they are legitimate questions,' John Howard says.

**Record temperatures on the way** ◆

Heatwave conditions are predicted for NSW this weekend with temperatures even expected to break the 40 degree mark.

**Touching tributes to 'mummy'** ◆

CAROLINE OVERINGTON

Fairfax family matriarch Lady Mary Fairfax OBE AC has been farewelled with moving and amusing eulogies at a service in Darling Point.



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