

Mary Alice Evatt

Michael Kirby

Long suffering spouses

Have you noticed a subtle change that has come over the Australian political scene? Not so long ago the spouses and partners of our political leaders lived entirely private lives. They might turn up at a few political functions. They might occasionally be photographed arriving or departing at Fairburn airbase or at some other place of passage. But they were definitely in the background. In our public life, we disdained some of the features of American politics. In fact, we rather tended to look on their showiness as un-Australian. We did not touch our hearts when the National Anthem was played. We just stood to attention. Our political leaders were never seen in stretch limousines with out-riders. As for their lives' companions and their families, they were definitely not on public display, not public property. They enjoyed the privacy of ordinary citizens.

Now, all that is changing as, in so many things, we imitate the American features of public life. Today, spouses and partners are often treated as fair game for the media and the public. Indeed, political leaders are virtually forced to introduce them into their high powered world.

The very private Helena Carr, definitely a backgrounder in previous years, was thrust into the foreground of the recent New South Wales election campaign. The compulsory appearance of candidates with their spouses is now a feature of virtually every major political rally. On election night, the victor at least must turn up with spouse, children, parents and siblings if they are alive. I feel sure that before long the family dog or cat or hamster will make a cameo appearance on such occasions.

The latest evidence of this was seen during the contest for the leadership of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. Mrs Crean and Mrs Beazley made their appearances. Interviews with them were played and replayed on television. The phenomenon is not confined to Australia. It has spread even into the musty halls of Downing Street. Although a distinct person in her own right, Cherie Booth QC, as Mrs Tony Blair, appears hand in hand with the British Prime Minister when needed and sometimes expresses personal views that are given wide publicity. It is as if matrimony or domestic partnership to a person in public life is now thought to confer on the beneficiary a special status: a kind of vicarious public role and popular legitimacy.

In Australia, we are well on the way to having a "First Lady". The modesty of the old days is disappearing before our eyes. Aspirants to public office must choose their partners very carefully because, in the future, those partners too will play a role in the pursuit of ambition and the performance of public duties. To some extent this change has come about as a result of the advent of television, satellites, global media and the internet. Increasingly, politics is the world of infotainment. Spin and image are replacing ideas and proper differences about fundamental values and national or global directions.

This was not the world of Australian politics when I first became aware of it. In those days, Mr Menzies seemed to be Prime Minister for life. We knew of his wife and family from an occasional story in the *Women's Weekly*. But Mrs (late Dame Pattie) Menzies disdained the cult of personality. So did the wife of the Opposition Leader, Dr H V Evatt. Mary Alice Evatt

(born Sheffer), like Mrs Menzies, did not feel that marriage to a political leader attracted legitimacy to her political views or impose burdens of duty, beyond the bare necessities, that invaded her rights to privacy as a citizen.

We cannot go back to those days. But it is a healthy corrective to the present era to remember them. Everyone who serves for a time in public office knows how important it is to have a companion who does not hesitate to speak home truths privately. In this respect, Bert Evatt was greatly blessed in Mary Alice. In a different way, she was greatly blessed in him. In their distinct fashions (and in their strong and enduring marriage) they shared a sustaining love of each other and of their children. Mary Alice developed her own distinct life as a student and practitioner of art. Not for her a public involvement in the detail of her husband's tempestuous national and international career. She sought her private fulfilment in the world of painting and drawing and later sculpture. Indeed, by choosing something so very different from the world of politics, law and international affairs that preoccupied her husband, she provided an island of stability, rationality and beauty that was a solace to the unsettled world in which Bert Evatt lived and which he often made more tempestuous than it needed to be. Mary Alice was her own person. She lived her own life. Her interests were not precisely the same as his. But they had their own importance.

In a way, the ideas that visited Mary Alice Evatt's mind were ideas of an eternal kind: of forms, and shapes, and images and reflections of reality. In the world of ideas, politics and law and human rights and freedom are crucial for the welfare of humanity. But so are the ideas of art and poetry and music. In this sense, the two Evatts were suitably matched. They were both searching for good, for the noble things in the human spirit - things that inspire and project the best that human beings can attain. But whereas Bert Evatt's world was one of politics, deals and law and compromise, Mary Alice lived, for the most part, in a kinder world involving a quest for beauty. On essentials, each, in their own sphere, was ardent, uncompromising and unwilling to bend to prejudice or attitudes they regarded as outmoded and yoked to the perceptions of the past. Each was a person of the spirit; but each drew on a different spring - and this explained their different approaches to life and to others.

Who was Mary Alice?

As a young schoolboy I admired Bert Evatt for his struggle against the Communist Party Dissolution Act. He won a challenge to its validity in the High Court. Then, against all odds, he won in the ensuing referendum campaign. The people of Australia rejected the attempt to amend the Constitution to permit a law against communists. In politics, H V Evatt did not embrace a minimalist position. He did not seek to reduce the political target that he presented. He and Menzies, bold spirits in their different ways, engaged each other before the Australian people in a mighty struggle of ideas. At that vital point, critical to our constitutional liberties, Evatt won.

I could identify with him because, like Evatt, I had attended Fort Street High School in Sydney, Australia's oldest public school. I knew of his fame. He was a Justice of the High Court at the age of 36; Australia's Foreign Minister and Attorney-General during the Second World War; leader of the Australian delegation on the establishment of the United Nations and later President of the General Assembly; and Opposition Leader after Mr Chifley. Unlike Mary Gaudron (who was once handed a copy of the Australian Constitution by Bert Evatt) I only ever saw him from afar. I knew nothing of his Titanic temper, his outrageous suspicions, the flaws in his personality and the lapses of judgment that are so well

documented as to be incontestable. At the end of his career, to remove him from the Parliamentary Leadership of the Australian Labor Party, he was appointed Chief Justice of New South Wales (the kind of delicacy not observed in the case of some of his successors). As a young lawyer, I saw him sitting as Chief Justice in the Banco Court in Sydney. By then, he was in terrible decline. Yet shining through his defects and human flaws were flashes of the mind of a genius, the courage of a lion and the valiant perception, when it truly counted, of safeguarding political diversity in Australia and of the importance of building a new world order.

Evatt's nature and his life and times did not make him an easy man to live with. He was very combative, including to Mary Alice. Doubtless, it was this streak in his behaviour, and his commitment to the Labor Party, that made him an unwelcomed son-in-law to Mary Alice's father, a conservative American. She had been born in Iowa and came with her family to Australia at an early age. In one biography of Bert, she is described as a "young woman of beauty, dignified with classical features". The pair met when they were both undergraduates at the University of Sydney. Mary Alice studied architecture at the University - a talent she later turned to use in the design of the Evatt home in Leura. When, in the midst of one of the most brilliant academic careers that the University has seen, Bert proposed to Mary Alice, her parents tried to head off the wedding by offering her a world tour: a big thing in those days. She declined and the couple were married in November 1920. Thus began a loving relationship that lasted until Bert's death in 1965.

Evatt hated to be parted from Mary Alice. He wrote loving letters and even poetry to her:

... and I am in a narrow place

And all its little streets are cold!

Because the absence of her face

Has rubbed the sullen air of gold

The letters between them were full of expressions of tenderness. They addressed each other as "Lover" and throughout their marriage, in times of triumph and in periods of catastrophe, they never let up in the exchanges of love.

Mary Alice supported H V Evatt's original foray into New South Wales politics. She became engrossed in the works of the English socialist, William Morris. Privately, she was foremost in supporting women's education in those years. She tried to soften his insensitivity to the feelings of others. One of the officers of the Department of Foreign Affairs who later worked closely with him in his years in Federal Government, Paul (later Sir Paul) Hasluck remarked: [Evatt] relied greatly on her. He could not have sustained his intense efforts without her. More than that, she had influence on him in two ways that directly affected his work as Minister. She influenced him in his judgment of other people. In many instances, I heard her tell him that he should not trust such and such a person or that so-and-so was working against him. He took notice of her warnings. Less frequently but on several occasions I heard her warn him against doing something, just looking at him fixedly and saying: 'Don't do it Bert' or 'No, you must on no account do that'. Her role seemed to me to be protective. According to some reports it was Mary Alice who urged Bert Evatt to resign from the High Court in 1940 to re-enter politics on the federal stage. Yet despite this intervention, that was critical for all that followed, Mary Alice did not intrude inappropriately into the substance of his professional life as a judge, Minister or political leader. In one letter that Evatt wrote to her he said:

I'm afraid I have at times led you a merry dance into politics, things outside the beaten track - but through it all - our love has survived - you have been the perfect wife and the perfect mother too.

It has been suggested that so absorbed and intense was his love for Mary Alice that it left insufficient space for sensitivity on Bert Evatt's part for other people. His tempestuous temper would often lead him to extreme, and unforgivable, rudeness to those about him. One biographer records how, in 1948 in London with Mary Alice, he showed extreme rudeness to the young Australian diplomat Peter (later Sir Peter) Heydon. It was left to Mary Alice to send ameliorating gifts to Heydon's two children - "a tacit apology for her husband's behaviour and an occurrence that was repeated after Heydon had again been unjustifiably lashed by an Evatt storm".

This story is now confirmed by one of those children, Justice Dyson Heydon, like me one of Evatt's successors as a Justice of the High Court of Australia. Not only did it happen once, it happened three times in quick succession. The young Dyson was obliged to write a young child's obedient letter to the grumpy old man. Sir Peter Heydon, still nursing Bert's wounds forty years later, held Mary Alice in high esteem:

I often wonder how much Mrs Evatt spent on presents for the children of officers over those years. It does illustrate how she tried to reduce the ill effects of Evatt's irrationality, rudeness and rascality. Generally she was liked and although like any of us she had prejudices and foibles, she had dignity, balance and generosity in all of which he was badly deficient. It cannot be said that repeated unpleasant storms of this kind passed Mary Alice by without having their impact on her. This sensitive artistic woman was subjected not only to his unruly, awkward, eccentric behaviour over many years but also to an extended vilification of him by many Australians, often urged on by a hostile media. At one stage in the 1940s, it led to a period when Mary Alice came to drink heavily - as a way of coping with the stresses of her life with Bert at the centre of seemingly endless political monsoons.

It would not have been easy living with a man brilliant and personally loving; rude to others yet infatuated with human rights. There is more than a hint of a bipolar disorder in Evatt's makeup. For the most part, he lived in the world of his very considerable brain. As sometimes happens, he loved human rights but found human beings messy. Only Mary Alice and his children seemed to engage a sustaining personal human love for him. Little wonder that Mary Alice, for her part, sought an escape from the pressures - beyond the work at home and with the children - into the realm of art and the world of her own creativity.

Escape to the world of art

When one knows these background facts, the escape of Mary Alice Evatt into the world of art becomes relatively easy to understand. She and Bert shared a love of modern, abstract art. In the 1920s they made friends amongst artists of all descriptions. But it was not until the 1930s that Mary Alice took lessons with Russell Drysdale and Peter Purves-Smith at George Bell's School in Melbourne. It was there that she met Sam Atyeo, a young painter who became a lifelong friend of the Evatts. It was he who, in 1946 in Paris, introduced Bert to Picasso.

In the comparatively tranquil years of the 1930s when Evatt served as a Justice of the High Court, the seat of the Court was in Melbourne. This kept Mary Alice in that city, away from her home for long periods. She filled the hours with training at art schools where her talent began to bloom and was disciplined and taught. In 1938 the couple went to Paris. Whilst Bert haunted the Louvre and other galleries, Mary Alice took a studio of her own in Montparnasse. On their return to Australia in 1939, Bert Evatt performed the opening of the first exhibition of the Contemporary Arts Society at the National Gallery of Victoria. It included works by Drysdale, James Gleeson, Sydney Nolan and many other artists who later became friends to the Evatts. At a time when most Australians were very sceptical of modern art or even hostile, the Evatts, with mutually supporting enthusiasm, challenged orthodoxy and embraced the new.

Bert Evatt purchased many works that were later to be extremely valuable, including a painting by Modigliani and a work by Vlaminck. When, later still, he became President of the United Nations General Assembly, the couple invited Picasso to come to the United Nations in Paris. He did so and the artist was greeted with a standing ovation.

During the unsettled years of Evatt's political life that followed, when the prize he most cherished, Prime Minister of Australia, eluded him, Mary Alice continued her painting, mostly in pastels. There were occasional exhibitions. For Mary Alice painting was a place of peace in which she could be herself, searching for form and beauty in a world in which both must often have seemed distant dreams. Mary Alice Evatt was appointed in 1943 as the first woman member of the New South Wales Art Gallery Trust. In that role she stood valiantly against philistinism. She supported young and new artists. She even extended her own skills, after Bert's death, by training in sculpture at the Canberra Art School. In the closing years of their life together, she did everything possible, with their daughter Rosalind, to protect Bert's reputation from the dark and sad times into which his mental deterioration had plunged the one-time intellectual giant.

Recently, when I was off to Paris for a meeting at UNESCO, I met Elizabeth Evatt, a famous member of the family on her way to a body of the World Bank in London on which she serves. We are children of the United Nation system H V Evatt and Australia helped to establish. She told me of how Mary Alice, as a trustee of the Art Gallery, had encouraged her and other schoolchildren to contribute their children's works to an exhibition designed to foster a love of art in the young. Nowadays, Elizabeth Evatt ruefully remarked, this would probably be denounced as corruption and investigated by ICAC. For Mary Alice, at the end of her life, Bert was gone and art and sculpture filled the great void left by his absence. The present exhibition of the works of Mary Alice Evatt affords us a glimpse into the life of a highly intelligent, creative and sensitive woman. Her spirit was undaunted by the travails to which it was subjected over five decades. She shared with Bert the pinnacles; but also the nadir of despair, defeat and humiliation. Yet in art she found her own expression. She embraced the modern schools. She supported Australian exemplars. She served in art administration. It is fitting that we should remember her spirit, for when all else is gone, the spirit of an artist endures.

I am glad that this exhibition, which began at the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, has come to Sydney to remind us of a distinguished fellow citizen and, indirectly of the husband whom she loved, and who was truly larger than life. With the paintings, drawings and sculpture come numerous photographs, letters and memorabilia of Mary Alice and of the turbulent

times in our country's story through which she and Bert lived. It is appropriate that in 1990, the Evatt Foundation decided to provide an annual art award in the name of Mary Alice Evatt for the best final year student art work chosen from the students' exhibition at the University of Western Sydney. I feel sure that Mary Alice, and Bert, would have preferred such a memorial to a bronze statue or a marble tombstone.

In the end, it is in the love of others and in goodness and kindness and beauty that most people live on. Mary Alice was an example of this truth. And though others of lesser spirit and ignoble disposition, mocked H V Evatt in his decline, and some justly criticised his rudeness and irrational suspicions, none could take from him his enormous achievements, as a judge, as a brilliant member of the War Cabinet that saved Australia at a moment of true national peril, as a founder of the United Nations and as the guardian of the Constitution against the largest blot upon our civil liberties attempted in the first century of federation. Mary Alice knew all these things. To the end, she preserved her love for "the Doc". As a story of fidelity and endurance, it is a passionate tale. It is worth remembering. Her art gives us a glimpse into her private world. It was her sanctuary. It was a place of beauty.

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG Justice of the High Court of Australia. This address was presented by Justice Kirby in opening the exhibition of the works of Mary Alice Evatt 'Mas' - 1898-1973 - Curator: Dr Melissa Boyde at the National Trust S H Ervin Gallery 2003.