

Extract from **A History of the Askin Government 1965-1975**

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US Presidential Visit to NSW

October 1966 saw the first visit to Australia of a serving US President. The excitement and enthusiasm which enveloped Sydney in anticipation of a four-hour visit from Texan born President Lyndon B. Johnson was palpable. The city streets were draped in a mass of red, white and blue bunting, with many buildings displaying pictures of the President. The designated route from Kingsford-Smith Airport for the presidential motorcade was renamed for the day in Johnson's honour.¹ The motorcade was to be showered with ticker-tape at strategic intervals.² There were 100,000 free US and Australian flags distributed, while 1,000 school children greeted the President wearing Texan cowboy hats.³ All children in NSW under the age of 15 were offered free travel to Sydney.⁴ The entrance to the formal reception area for the presidential party at the NSW Art Gallery was adorned with a display of caged kangaroos and koalas.⁵ The Vietnam Committee which represented all the peace and anti-Vietnam war organisations was formed to organise a mass legal and peaceful "anti-Vietnam war demonstration".⁶

In the midst of all the exuberance Askin demonstrated his artistic flair by suggesting that "beach towels could be hung from the windows to brighten the city". Askin has sometimes been referred to as a philistine, and, after his artistic contribution, this claim might have some merit. Not to be upstaged by Prime Minister

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 1966, p.3.

² *Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 1966, p.9.

³ *The Sun*, 21 October 1966, p.45.

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 October 1966, p.1.

⁵ *SMH*, 15 October 1966, p.1.

⁶ *ibid*, 10 October 1966, p.28.

Holt's slogan "all the way with LBJ", Askin endorsed the slogan "make Sydney gay for LBJ".⁷ The view was expressed that Askin was "overdoing the welcoming".⁸

The motorcade was involved in some dramatic events during the journey from the airport to the Art Gallery. There was a high speed detour when the posse of US security staff out-maneuvred an anti-Vietnam demonstration which threatened to block the route near the University of NSW on Anzac Parade. This caused disappointment for the thousands of well-wishers who had spent hours waiting for the motorcade, only to be rewarded by a flash of glass and chrome as the vehicles sped past.⁹ Children wept, whilst some adults cursed that "Sydney has been taken for a ride" and threw their flags into the gutter in disgust.¹⁰

The vehicles sped too quickly for the ticker-tape to be effective but not quickly enough to escape the accuracy of the flour bombs hurled by the anti-Vietnam war demonstrators "who provided the biggest anti-Vietnam, anti LBJ demonstration".¹¹ The air conditioning of the bubble top Cadillac failed after the cooling system was blocked by streamers. Subsequently, the President and his wife Lady Bird were rescued by a fleet of Commonwealth cars. As the motorcade continued it was halted several times while the police dragged away the demonstrators who had flung themselves in front of the cars.¹² Just as the drama seemed to be subsiding, and with the Art Gallery finally in sight, the President was upstaged by an escaping koala.¹³

In the context of the modern staging of such events, the four-hour sojourn of the President was farcical. However, it was 1966 and Askin had orchestrated an extravaganza with a broad overarching benefit for all involved. Askin spent "a gay day with LBJ" and he commented that "Sydney rose to the occasion. It could never

⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1966, p.3; *SMH*, 15 October 1966, p.1.

⁸ *SMH*, 19 October 1966, p.27; *The Sun*, 21 October 1966, p.34; *The Sun*, 25 October 1966, p.32; *Daily Mirror*, 21 October 1966, p.4

⁹ *The Bulletin*, 29 October 1966, p.8; *The Sun*, 24 October 1966, p.25.

¹⁰ *SMH*, 23 October 1966, p.2, 140.

¹¹ *The Bulletin*, 29 October 1966, p.8; *Daily Mirror* 22 October 1966, p.3

¹² *Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1966, p.7

¹³ *SMH*, 23 October 1966, p.118.

have been better”.¹⁴ LBJ enjoyed an extensive and favourable US press coverage.¹⁵ The visit was touted as the “biggest reception in Australia’s history” and it was declared that “Hollywood couldn’t have done it better.”¹⁶ The anti-Vietnam war movement received world-wide coverage of their cause;¹⁷ some “bush kids” were able to visit Sydney for the first time; and one hundred and forty churchmen from Australia and the US including three bishops from Protestant churches in Australia took advantage of the opportunity to present a signed statement urging the President to de-escalate the hostilities in Vietnam. On their way back to the airport, after the harbour cruise, the President endeared himself to some of the disappointed crowd. He stopped the motorcade four times. He threw his ten gallon Texan hat into the delighted crowd at the Sydney Town Hall, exchanged handshakes and “howdies” before boarding the US Air Force jet bound for the Vietnam war conference in Manila.¹⁸ Ironically the Aborigines were spared from participating in the excruciating event. In contrast to their Maori counterparts, they were excluded from the festivities. At the Wellington airport in New Zealand, en-route to Australia, the President received a traditional Maori welcome in the form of a war dance performed by Maori tribesman.¹⁹

The political notion that entertainment for the masses invokes harmony and goodwill amongst the citizens has been intermittently utilised throughout history. Askin certainly recognised the importance of insight and adaptability and exploited his fortune by providing a “three ring circus” for the voter when he orchestrated the Presidential visit. He promoted himself and the government by bathing in the limelight and the popularity of President Johnson. He instilled pride in the voters by showcasing the harbour city to the world. His leadership authority was enhanced when he positioned himself by the side of the most powerful man on earth,

¹⁴ *ibid*, 23 October 1966, p.140.

¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 1966, p. 9; *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1966, p.5.

¹⁶ *SMH*, 23 October 1966, p.2; *SMH*, 24 October 1966, p.2; *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October, p.5; *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1966, p. 2.

¹⁷ *The Sun*, 24 October 1966, p.1; *The Sun*, 22 October 1966, p.1; *Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1966, p.1; *The Australian*, 24 October 1966, p.3.

¹⁸ *SMH*, 23 October 1966, p.142; *SMH*, 21 October 1966, p.1

¹⁹ *The Sun* 20 October 1966, p.2; *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1966, p.1; *The Australian*, 20 October 1966, p.1; *SMH*, 29 October 1966, p.5.

particularly in the context of the anxieties of the Cold War, whereby Australia considered the US its great and powerful ally.

The visit of the US President illuminated attributes of Askin's temperament. Alongside the President he was able to project his self-image as dependable, beneficent and respectable. His respect and adulation for authority was reflected by his exuberance over the event. This was the occasion when Askin uttered the legendary "run over the bastards", when he was referring to the demonstrators. The President was amused by the "back slapping" laconic humour, but unfortunately it has been taken literally by the media and has become part of the Askin myth.

At the airport President Johnson told the press that the demonstrators had the right to dissent.²⁰ He also embraced Askin with a Texan bear hug and told him; "we have never had a greater welcome than Sydney gave us".²¹ According to David McNicoll, a former journalist with the *Bulletin*; there is no doubt that Askin made a great impression on the President. Many years later McNicoll spent a day with Johnson at his ranch in Texas where he "enquired warmly": "How's Bob Askin? ... Now there's a man".²²

Robert Askin – "Run over the bastards"

Askin's skill as a consummate raconteur was savoured by the guests who attended the US Chamber of Commerce luncheon in Sydney on 23 July 1968. He was clapped and cheered when he told them that LBJ was amused when he advised a police officer to "run over the bastards". Askin was referring to the demonstrators who were blocking the motorcade on 22 October 1966.²³ Askin was never repentant over the alleged incident. On the contrary, in the interview with Pratt he said; "Oh yes, oh well that's not alleged, I said it all right, but it was said jocularly".²⁴ It was

²⁰ *The Australian*, 24 October 1966, p.1.

²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1966, p.5.

²² *The Bulletin*, 22 September 1981, p.32.

²³ *SMH*, 24 July 1968, p.4.

²⁴ Interview (Pratt): Sir Robert Askin, 1:2/27

unfortunate for Askin that a reporter overheard the story at the luncheon and it subsequently became the subject of headlines in the tabloid press. Nonetheless, it was politically careless and demonstrated Askin's hubris which marred his political judgement until the Georges by-election on 19 September 1970.

After being energised by the response of the guests, Askin continued his story and referred to the demonstrators as "the great unwashed" and advised the US businessmen present not to be misled by "long haired people who had nothing better to do with their time". Askin claimed that LBJ remarked that "when I look into the faces of the crowd ... 90% are with me ... more than I could find in America."²⁵ In hindsight, LBJ was probably observing the naivety of the Australian general public which was underpinned by the notion that the US was our great and powerful friend and ally during the cold war.

The *SMH* reported that Askin had shocked his Cabinet. The opposition leader Hills said that Askin "showed an unbalanced attitude of mind that made him unfit to hold office" and intimated that the police officer might have carried out the request. Askin was unrepentant and believed that nobody would "take the remarks seriously". It is unreasonable to charge Askin with irresponsibility: rather, it was an example of Australian laconic humour which was obviously understood by the police officer. Hills was probably accurate when he described the incident as an "outburst of uncontrolled exhibitionism".²⁶ There is little doubt that the "boy from Glebe", perched up in the limousine beside the most powerful man on earth, was intoxicated with exuberance. Askin was in his element, especially in the light of LBJ's reputed obstreperous, laconic and lewd sense of humour.²⁷

²⁵ *SMH*, 24 July 1968, p.4.

²⁶ *SMH*, 25 July 1968, p.2.

²⁷ Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *LBJ: A Life*, New York, 1999, p.371,515; Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, London, 1982, p.404.