HOWARD: What was your overall assessment of Bob Menzies as a political leader. For example did he get the crucial balance between pragmatism and policy right?

BLAINEY: Well, he was leader of the Coalition and you've
led a coalition. It has to be balanced. Nobody can win, can they, all the time, it has to be balanced and I think that it was a remarkable Coalition formed at first by SM Bruce and Earle Page in 1923. Here was a rural party forming a coalition with a city party and here was a - they were free traders at first. Here was a free trade party, the Country Party, forming a coalition with a strong protectionist party. And it was really a most unusual mix and it was a very difficult coalition to work, wasn't it, and occasionally they fell out with one another and in Menzies' period they fell out with one another for a time, didn't they?

HOWARD: They never came apart but they had a lot of - they had tensions.

BLAINEY: Yes, they had great tensions and then in 1949 when Mr Menzies came back he obviously realised that the Coalition was all-important and Fadden, quite clearly Fadden liked Curtin more than Menzies. Fadden was a Queenslander from the sugar cane areas, of course a very able politician and he made sure that Fadden was a key man in the Menzies ministry which he was and here were these two parties with
their very different bases and still in some part with different ideologies, although, of course, the Country Party had become rapid protectionists by then. But–

It would be interesting to know if in any other long-lasting democracy there's been a coalition that's held power for so long and been so successful and yet with such…

HOWARD: I can't recall one. Certainly it hasn't been the case in Britain or Canada or New Zealand. Not of such longevity. It's an extraordinary tribute to Menzies and I suppose successive Liberal leaders with the coalition and the National Party, Country Party being kept together.

BLAINEY: Yes, so you'd have to say that was one of Menzies' great achievements and the cause of his longevity that he and Fadden, even though they had many differences, worked together as a team.

HOWARD: I wonder if you can reflect for a moment on your own impressions of him at the time and your assessment of him as an individual and a political leader?
BLAINEY: I first set eyes on him when I was a schoolboy. Like him I was a scholarship boy at Wesley College in Melbourne and he came to school assembly one morning, I think it must have been 1946, and gave an address to the whole school. The address was based on what he'd seen in England during the war and it was in many ways like a travel talk and he really was even then a commanding presence of substantial physique with a strong head and those Scottish eyebrows, people often call Scottish.

The voice was so well modulated, both an Australian voice and an English voice. This is at a time when the ABC employed largely announcers with a bit of England in their voice. It was a kind of accent that was very much in favour at the time and I think people much preferred the matter of their political affiliations, that accent to the accent that Mr Chifley or Mr Caldwell had partly because they'd been outdoor speakers and had gained huskiness and his willingness to speak slowly, which was a hallmark of good entre at that time, to pause at the right time kept you waiting for the next word. It's an actor's gift, isn't it?
And yet he didn't have the appearance of an actor. He was somebody who was speaking in the best English traditions with a very large vocabulary but none of the words there for showing off purposes, words because they were the best words and he thought if the audience didn't know them they should know them. It was like being in theatre listening to this man with no notes, of course, looking at the audience the whole time. It really was - so many of the boys I knew at the time thought it was a profound sensation to hear this man speaking. My father had an interesting experience with him. Family experiences partly determine your attitudes, don't they?

HOWARD: They do.

BLAINEY: My father was a Methodist minister and he was a Methodist minister when young – in Jeparit in the Wimmera in the wheat belt. My eldest brother was born in the Jeparit and the Menzies lived in Jeparit. Bob Menzies’ father was a storekeeper. They were great Methodists. There was no Presbyterian Church in Jeparit. The Menzies were very prominent -
HOWARD: The next best thing.

BLAINEY: That was the best they could find. So Mr Menzies senior was head of the Sunday school. He laid the foundation stone of the church, which is still there and in 1954 when Mr Menzies was prime minister, I call him Mr Menzies, I know he was Sir Robert. He was invited to a back to a Jeparit celebration and my father was invited back to give the sermon and Mr Menzies was at the church with Dame Pattie and they asked him would he read psalm 90. And he read psalm 90 with all his eloquence but he gave a brief explanation in advance of the background to psalm 90, which is interesting. My father gave the sermon. I only have this from my father who wrote a little memoir about it. My father gave the sermon and presumably Mr Menzies was hustled away to Horsham or somewhere for his next appointment and they didn't speak to each other after the event. I don't know whether they did before, and about quite a few months or even a year or so later, Mr Menzies was at a garden party to which my father was invited, a Methodist garden party, and he beckoned my father and came over and said, “That was a great sermon that
you gave, there was one fault”, and my father nervously said, “What was it?” He said, “It wasn't long enough.”

No, and you never forget it and he must have done that very often in the 1950s and the 1960s whereas he wouldn't have worried, I suppose, 1939, '40, '41. Then I used to see him - I used to love going to political meetings in the late '40s and the early '50s and I heard him speak sometimes, they were always in town halls, of course, and I would hear him speak there sometimes. He was a great man with interjections. He was really - although he'd become much more tactful he could be very ruthless as an interjector but it would be a spectator sport a public meeting, isn't it?

HOWARD: It is.

BLAINEY: And that's part of the excitement.

HOWARD: It's a pity we don't have more of them now.

BLAINEY: They used to say such funny things. He had a very good relationship with the press. No doubt they attacked
him as they attack all prime ministers, but he was on such good terms with some press people that he'd say something outrageous and he'd say: “Please don't publish that.”

HOWARD: Lucky prime minister.

BLAINEY: Lucky, yes, and a press man told me that there was some legislation in the 1950s about insurance and there was a term calamity or a disaster, what's the difference between a calamity and a disaster and - a legal point and a reporter asked Mr Menzies, “Please, everyone's wondering about this legislation, what's the difference between a calamity and a disaster?” And Mr Menzies said, “If Dr Evatt ever fell into a Sydney Harbour it would be a calamity but if they pulled him out again that would be a disaster.” He said, “Don't report that. Don't report that.” But that's what he could say.

HOWARD: He had the capacity to articulate a philosophy, didn't he?

BLAINEY: He did, yes.
HOWARD: With the Forgotten People speeches.

BLAINEY: He had a gift with words. I suppose even as a young boy reading about him, even when he was aged 10 he had a gift with words and he cultivated and he became a great speaker. I mean even in his first term as prime minister from 1939 to 1941 people marvelled at his oratory no matter what side of politics they were on.

And that was a great gift when you were forming a new party. Politics is a game of words, isn't it?

HOWARD: It's the art of persuasion, isn't it? It’s in a way government by discussion isn’t it?

BLAINEY: Well you’d know that more than anybody. But democracy in many ways is government by discussion, isn't it?

HOWARD: It is, yes, and you get the best outcomes if it's government by discussion. To what extent do you think it's
fair to say that a great turning point for Menzies on the way back was a decision of the Chifley Government to try to nationalise the banks in 1947

BLAINEY: That really was a remarkable decision, wasn't it? Since the 1920s the Labor Party had nationalisation in its platform but nobody thought it would nationalise institutions as powerful and as central as the private banks and when Mr Chifley announced it out of the blue he discussed it already with the cabinet, hadn't he, it wasn't -

HOWARD: It wasn't unilateral.

BLAINEY: No, and the sensation was profound and I was a tractor driver. I used to drive a tractor for an uncle down in Colac in school vacations and he was very political and a meeting was being held in Colac just after bank nationalisation had been announced and we went along to the public hall in Colac in Victoria and it was for me almost a transforming experience to see the intense indignation and fear, what would happen if the Government knew about all your banking activities, private and corporate?
It really was - it was almost like a revivalist meeting, they didn't know what to do, of course. All they could do is express their indignation and astonishment but those kinds of meetings must have taken place all over Australia in the week or a fortnight after the decision had been announced.

HOWARD: And many of the people who attended them were employees of the private banks?

BLAINEY: Yes, they were.

HOWARD: And good unionists

BLAINEY: They were, yes, the bank officers at a powerful union.

HOWARD: Bank nationalisation was a real gift from the Chifley Labor government wasn’t it? And he had rhetorical skills to fully exploit it didn’t he?

BLAINEY: That's right and of course the Liberal Party way back had appointed Mr Chifley to a royal commission on
banking which gave him his intense interest and knowledge of banking.

HOWARD: Yes, he had a lifetime obsession about what he saw as a negative role of the banks during the Depression.

BLAINEY: That's right, yes. He was a locomotive driver. In some ways banking was his absorbing interest and the power that the banks had.

HOWARD: Unusually for the time when he became prime minister he remained treasurer.

BLAINEY: Yes, he did, did he? Yes, that's right, he did, yes.

HOWARD: And finally, Geoffrey, how do you assess Robert Menzies' place in Australian history?

BLAINEY: Well, it's almost a unique place in Australian history. He was prime minister for longer than anybody else and he was prime minister at important times in our history. He had many achievements to his credit. He presided over a
country in a period of widely shared prosperity and he also presided over the country at a time of great international dangers and crises so it's a remarkable period and interestingly while a true blue Labor supporter wouldn't have a bar of putting Menzies on a pedestal while he was PM and why should they?

He was their opponent. By the 1980s and the 1990s Mr Hawke and Mr Keating were beginning to pay tributes to him both privately and publicly, weren't they? In other words, he'd become a national figure, a special person in the national memory. Will that happen again? Well we don't know but it's such a long period and I assume as an outsider it's becoming more and more difficult to be a national leader, whether in Australia or elsewhere, but it's especially difficult in a federation and I barrack for federations, but to be a national leader in a federation, a big territory of rapidly expanding countries it's just a very difficult task and the chances are that the more difficult task, the task becomes more likely the proprietor will be toppled.