

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Tom Uren
1921 -
Politician

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 5 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Tom Uren

Director/Producer Frank Heimans

Executive Producer Sharon Connolly

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Also in Series 5: Charles Birch, Zelda D'Aprano, Miriam Hyde, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Mungo MacCallum, Dame Margaret Scott

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SYNOPSIS

Tom Uren, 'the conscience of Parliament', is one of the best-known and most-respected Labor politicians of his generation. As a minister in two governments he knew what it was like to hold the reins of power, yet he never lost the sense of justice and fair play that has driven him through an eventful life.

Born in the working class suburb of Balmain in the 1920s, Uren encountered the poverty of the Depression first-hand with an unemployed father and a mother who worked as a barmaid.

Uren's response was to fight, literally – he trained as a boxer and had hopes of pursuing a career as a professional fighter, but his plans were derailed by the outbreak of World War Two. Uren enlisted and was sent to Timor where, fighting against overwhelming odds, he and his comrades were taken prisoner.

The following dark years saw him suffer the brutality of the Burma-Thai Railway, then a spell in Japan itself. It was this later period that formed his undying belief that it was militarism and not the Japanese people who were to blame for the war and its terrible atrocities. His wartime experiences instilled in him a lifelong opposition to militarism and fascism and a belief in socialism and peaceful co-existence.

Returning home at war's end, Uren aimed to go back into the fight game but after a decisive defeat in England, he gave up the idea. He went to work as a manager at Woolworths and at the same time joined the Australian Labor Party. His energy and commitment quickly took him to the top of the Left faction of the party. Uren entered Federal Parliament in 1958.

With the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972, he became Minister for Urban and Regional Development and initiated many reforms, saving suburbs from freeways and redevelopment and creating new national parks. In 1975 he set up the Australian Heritage Commission and the National Estate.

After serving a second term of office as a minister in the Hawke Government, Uren retired from politics in 1990. He published his highly acclaimed biography **Straight Left** in 1994.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Politics, Australian History and SOSE/HSIE.

AFTER WATCHING

What do you recall from viewing the program?

- What does Tom believe is the greatest thing you can do in life?
- What did Tom's mother have to do in order to keep up with rent payments on the family home?
- What sports championship did Tom win when he was a teenager?
- During World War Two where was Tom posted to after being stationed at Darwin? What happened to him at his new posting, and where was he then sent?
- What recurring disease did Tom contract?
- During the war who was Tom's political hero, and who did Tom contrast this hero figure to?
- Where was Tom sent to in Japan, and for what purpose?

■ Tom says he did not hate the Japanese. Who or what did he hate and struggle against for the rest of his life?

■ Who was Patty Palmer?

■ Where did Tom work immediately after the war?

■ What terrible personal failure did Tom experience when he went to England, and where did he eventually find employment back in Australia? What was his job position in Lithgow?

■ When Tom was elected to the Australian Parliament, what Labor Party faction did he join? Who was the Labor politician he most admired, and why?

■ What did Tom see as Gough Whitlam's faults, and what did he most admire about Whitlam?

■ What position did Tom hold in the shadow ministry, then later as a government minister? Describe in general the positive results that flowed from this.

■ Name the legislation Tom introduced into parliament of which he is 'extremely proud'.

■ What important issues were dealt with in Tom's first marriage?

■ What does Tom 'dearly regret' about his first marriage?

■ What are some issues that arose in Tom's second marriage?

■ Describe the future Australia that Tom hopes will exist for his young daughter as she grows older.

■ Describe the values that Tom ultimately believes in, and fights for.

DEFINING MOMENTS AND EXPERIENCES

Growing up in difficult circumstances during the years of the Great Depression, and later being taken prisoner by the Japanese during World War Two, were two major experiences in Tom Uren's life that formed and strengthened his general world view and his belief in socialism.

■ As a class, prepare a project on daily family life in Australian cities such as Sydney and Melbourne during the years of the Great Depression, where many 'bread-winners' were thrown into unemployment. You may prepare this in small groups as a multimedia mix of prepared lectures or demonstrations to the class on specific aspects of the topic, presentation of display posters, magazine-style articles, transcripts or recordings of interviews with older people who lived through the 1930s, and preparation of documentary radio programs which may also feature advertisements and popular music from the era. Particularly examine the effects of unemployment on families, how they coped and survived, and the interrelated importance of sports activities, public dances, the movies and popular radio. (Remember that many adults in the 1930s did not own a car or have a telephone, making it difficult to search for work).

■ Research and write an informative-style essay on the rise of socialism and communism in Australia during the Great Depression, linking this to unemployment and the general treatment of the working masses by employers and government. Explain also the rise of the New Guard movement, which occurred in response. (You may also wish to refer to the events surrounding the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, where a protest against the socialist-leaning Lang Labor government of New South Wales took place.)

- In pairs or small groups prepare and enact a drama scene drawing on Tom's memories of his mother having to attend an interview with 'community leaders' to ask for welfare (money or docket for food, heating and clothing) to support her family, and how she might feel about having to do this.
- Write a short story set during the Great Depression, where a parent decides whether or not to pawn something of value, such as a family heirloom, to pay the rent for the family's house.
- Individually or in pairs research and prepare an illustrated article for a popular magazine about the infamous Thai-Burma railway, built by Australian and British prisoners of war under Japanese guard during World War Two. (For a fictionalised account, you may wish to view the 1957 film, available on video and DVD, **The Bridge on the River Kwai**.)
- Prepare a short biography, mainly focusing on events during the construction of the Thai-Burma railway, of Edward 'Weary' Dunlop, and the influence and effect he had on the men under his command in the labour camp.
- Speaking about the survival of the POWs under brutal conditions, Tom refers to 'the strong looking after the weak' as an aspect of the 'principles of socialism', or in less political terms, as 'the collective spirit'. Write a series of secret diary entries kept by a POW of this collective spirit. (Remember that it was a punishable offence for a POW to keep a diary.)
- As a result of being a prisoner of war in a tropical environment, Tom had recurring bouts of malaria which, he says, was a 'humbling experience'. First, discuss how we may understand this reaction to experiencing the disease. Prepare an informative display poster explaining what malaria is, how it may be contracted, how it affects people in the short and long term, how it may be treated and whether it is curable. Has malaria been defeated or does it still exist in various parts of the world? Have death rates from malaria dropped? (You may need to include maps and graphs for this activity.)
- Discuss in class whether it is possible for young people today to have any positive 'defining experiences' that may influence their later lives. Are there issues in today's world, whether internationally, nationally or locally, that are challenging your overall world view, forcing you to think more about your role, your goals and aims in life?

SPORTS AND EMPLOYMENT

In the program Tom tells us, first, of his interest and aptitude in surfing and boxing during the 1930s and 1940s, and of the various ways he earned a living after being demobbed from the army after World War Two and after his planned sporting career failed.

- The class should separate into two groups. One group is to research the history of the development of surf life-saving clubs in Australia, looking at how, why, where and when these clubs were formed, their purpose, their activities and popularity, and their role in the local community. The second group is to research the introduction, rise and popularity of surfing as a sport in Australia. In both areas, concentrate on the pre-World War Two era, and include pictorial information as well as text. Where the two coincide, as in the development of combined life-saving and surf clubs, the two groups should combine their findings. You may present these activities in various ways: as a set of web pages for the school intranet, as display posters, as a popular or sports-oriented magazine

or even as a class-produced television documentary (where you may be able to use archival newsreel footage).

- Write a short story set in the 1930s, before the outbreak of World War Two, about a day spent at a beach life-saving or surfing carnival, either as a participant or an onlooker. It may be presented as a sports action tale, a teenage 'rite-of-passage' story, a drama, comedy, even a fantasy. Discuss in class the possibilities for plot and character development.
- Research the history of the sport of boxing in the 20th century, especially looking at it as both a means of self-defence and as a spectator sport involving large sums of money and even crime, the similarities and differences between amateur and professional boxing, the development of boxing clubs for youths, and the governmental and medical controls over the sport in Australia. Discuss or debate in class the question of whether boxing in general is a legitimate and healthy activity or whether it is a violent blood sport that should be banned or at least be subject to strict regulations with heavy penalties.
- First discuss in class the script possibilities for the following activity, especially plotting, range of characters and settings. Using Tom's comments in the program as a starting point, either individually or in pairs write a short film or TV drama about a young, hopeful boxer at the beginning of his career who suddenly realises that his dream of success in the sport is destroyed forever. You may want to include storyboard illustrations, or descriptions, for particular moments designed to stand out as emotionally important.
- As Tom tells us, when he joined Woolworths as a trainee executive, he attempted to keep his working life separate from his outside interests, particularly in politics. Discuss in class whether, as you get older, your own outside interests and responsibilities place demands on you that conflict with your duties and responsibilities as a student. Is it possible to overcome these problems successfully or not? What short-term and long-term coping strategies have you devised? Have you ever asked for advice in these matters from others, such as parents, siblings, friends or teachers? Is it necessary to look at these difficult situations from other people's viewpoints, and to make compromises, rather than following your own desires and choices?
- Drawing on Tom's comments in the program, write a playscript conversation between two people in the street of a town, discussing the behaviour and activities of a local executive employed by a large and respected retailer, who is handing out political pamphlets outside his or her working hours. Have times and attitudes changed? Decide whether to set the scene in the 1940s-1950s or in the present. With another student, act the scene out to the class.

PUBLIC AND POLITICAL CAREER

Tom's experiences during the Depression years and in the army during World War Two helped to form a world view that led to him joining the Australian Labor Party, gaining pre-selection, winning a seat to federal parliament, and beginning a long and successful career in politics, first as a backbencher then as a shadow minister and later as a government minister.

- Discuss in class a possible job description for recruiting an elected politician in our society, and whether you think this is different from the actual daily reality of politics. What are the personal qualities and characteristics, experience, education and beliefs required, or that should be required, of a politician? Do we judge our politicians too harshly, or expect too much from them? Should we demand

standards and behaviour from politicians that perhaps most people in other walks of life would find difficult to achieve? Are there any politicians either today or from the past you admire? Discuss why.

- During the program Tom expresses admiration for Federal ALP politician Jim Cairns. Research, then prepare as though for a modern popular magazine, a biography of the life, political and social philosophy, ideals, successes and failures of Cairns.
- From the program listen carefully to Tom's comments about Jim Cairns. Using this as a basis, plan and write a fiction short story about a young man or woman newly elected to parliament who comes under the influence, or even under the spell, or missionary zeal, of an older, charismatic politician, and the possible results or repercussions of this. Your story may be written in any mode – drama or comedy – and viewpoint. To carry out this activity, first discuss in class the possible settings, plots, themes and character situations, and how such a story might conclude.
- Political life is often made up of small public gains and losses, with occasional victories and defeats both for individual politicians and their parties, in the short and long term. With this in mind, in pairs, plan, draw up the rules and construct a board or card game of the triumphs and tribulations of political life. A version of Snakes and Ladders may be an example. Trial your game with other members from the class, taking their feedback into account to adjust, revise and improve if necessary. (Those with programming expertise may wish to devise a computer game.)
- Tom's political achievements include the setting up of the Australian Heritage Council (and the Register of the National Estate). Research this institution and present an informative popular magazine-style article aimed specifically at teenagers. You may first wish to discuss in class the writing, editing and layout techniques that would appeal to this audience and age level.
- In the program Tom refers to 'the saving of Woolloomooloo... [and] the Glebe Estate'. Research the background to these social, cultural and political issues of development versus heritage in the 1970s and 1980s (or any other similar situation you find), then in pairs or small groups plan a script for a dramatised radio documentary about it. (The interrelated issue of 'green bans' organised by trade union leader Jack Munday may also be built into the documentary.) Conclude the program by asking whether the general issue is still of relevance to us today. Record the script with the help of other class members.

PRIVATE LIFE

If we may judge from the program, behind the public exterior Tom's marriage, family and home life away from politics in Canberra were often not easy for him and those closest to him.

- You are a teenage daughter or son of a parent who is often absent from home for long periods due to work commitments (eg as a politician). Write the script for a late-night private phone conversation between your parent and yourself. Build your feelings and your parent's feelings into the script. Consider carefully how the conversation will start, develop and conclude. With another student, play the scene to the class.
- Drawing on Tom's comments as a starting point, write a short story about a marriage partner who discovers that he or she is unable to have children. How might each partner deal with the ramifications of this situation?

- Listen to what Tom says at the end of the program. Either write a letter or record a video for your imagined future daughter or son, telling them of the kind of life in Australia you would like them to inherit.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Please note this listing is not exhaustive.

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- Matthew Thomason (director), **National Treasures: First Surfboard**, Film Australia, Sydney, 2004 (introduction of surfboards in Australia, 1914)

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