

The tally room's over

With election fever in the air, memories of key contests from yesteryear come flooding back.

I SHALL miss the tally room. The news that the television channels would not broadcast from the tally room on election night this September 7 left me with feelings of sadness and nostalgia.

The first year I could vote was also my first year as a journalist, working for Channel Nine News. And that night in the tally room, waiting to see if Labor's Arthur Calwell would defeat Robert Menzies, was exciting. Eventually Menzies won again, but by the narrowest of margins.

Looking back as a citizen and journalist, I have voted in 23 federal elections, and one way or another, I have reported or commented on all of them. Even the most boring and depressing campaigns, and we don't have to go too far back to think of some, became exciting in the tally room.

For one thing, as their fate hung in the balance, politicians had to drop the "polispeak" and tell it like it was. As a television viewer, fortified by pretzels and bagel chips, the "run through the board" was always worth waiting for. That said, I wasn't in the tally room at all for two of the most memorable nights in my political education. But I made sure I was there for the third.

The first Australian "ballot" that I can remember in some detail wasn't an election, but a referendum. Nor did I vote in it. It was more than a decade before I would be old enough. But the September 1951 referendum on banning the Communist Party was my introduction to Australian politics.

As a member of Habonim, the Zionist youth movement, I was recruited to distribute "Vote NO" pamphlets outside the Kadimah, then in Lygon Street, Carlton, and in front of every kosher butcher shop, delicatessen and bakery.

Menzies had won government from Labor in 1949, and had passed legislation banning the Communist Party. But when the High Court ruled the legislation was unconstitutional, Menzies took the proposal to a referendum.

Led by Dr Herbert Evatt, Labor opposed it. But so did the Young Liberals. Like many others, they saw the proposed ban as a threat to freedom of speech and association. Influential Jewish spokesmen agreed, among them the rising young legal star, Zelman Cowen.

The referendum's defeat was a landmark in Australia's political history. But it happened before television, and so before the tally room entered the living room.

My second memorable "ballot" came 21 years later, in December 1972, when Gough Whitlam defeated Billy McMahon in the

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SAM LIPSKI

now legendary "It's Time" election. As a Washington correspondent for *The Australian*, I was far from home.

But it was clear that the 1972 ballot was history in the making. Whitlam was campaigning to become the first Labor prime minister in 23 years. No Australian under 44 had ever voted in an election which Labor had won. Although I wasn't there, I followed Radio Australia's broadcast from the tally room, and the "run through the board" came vividly alive.

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It was a heady and exciting time. As an Australian journalist, I suddenly found myself in demand by the American press to explain what had happened "Down under". As a citizen, I believed Whitlam's victory heralded a new era. As a Jewish voter, I was encouraged to hear that he had promised to be the first Australian prime minister to visit Israel, and be a true friend of the Jewish community. I was glad that I had voted for him. But not for long.

Less than a year later, in October 1973, as Israel was reeling under the surprise Yom Kippur attack from Egypt and Syria, I sat in Whitlam's office with Sydney's Lou Klein, then president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. We pleaded with the prime minister to condemn the attack on Israel as a breach of all norms of international law. He refused, and insisted Australia would continue to be "even-handed".

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As a citizen, I thought his government's failures outweighed any of his achievements. As a journalist, I abandoned my objectivity on the night of December 13, 1975, when he lost in a landslide to Malcolm Fraser. And in the third memorable "ballot" of my political education, I cheered as I watched history happen in the tally room.

Sadly, such opportunities won't come again. The electronic media giveth, and the electronic media taketh away.

Sam Lipski is director of The Pratt Foundation and a former editor of *The AJN*.