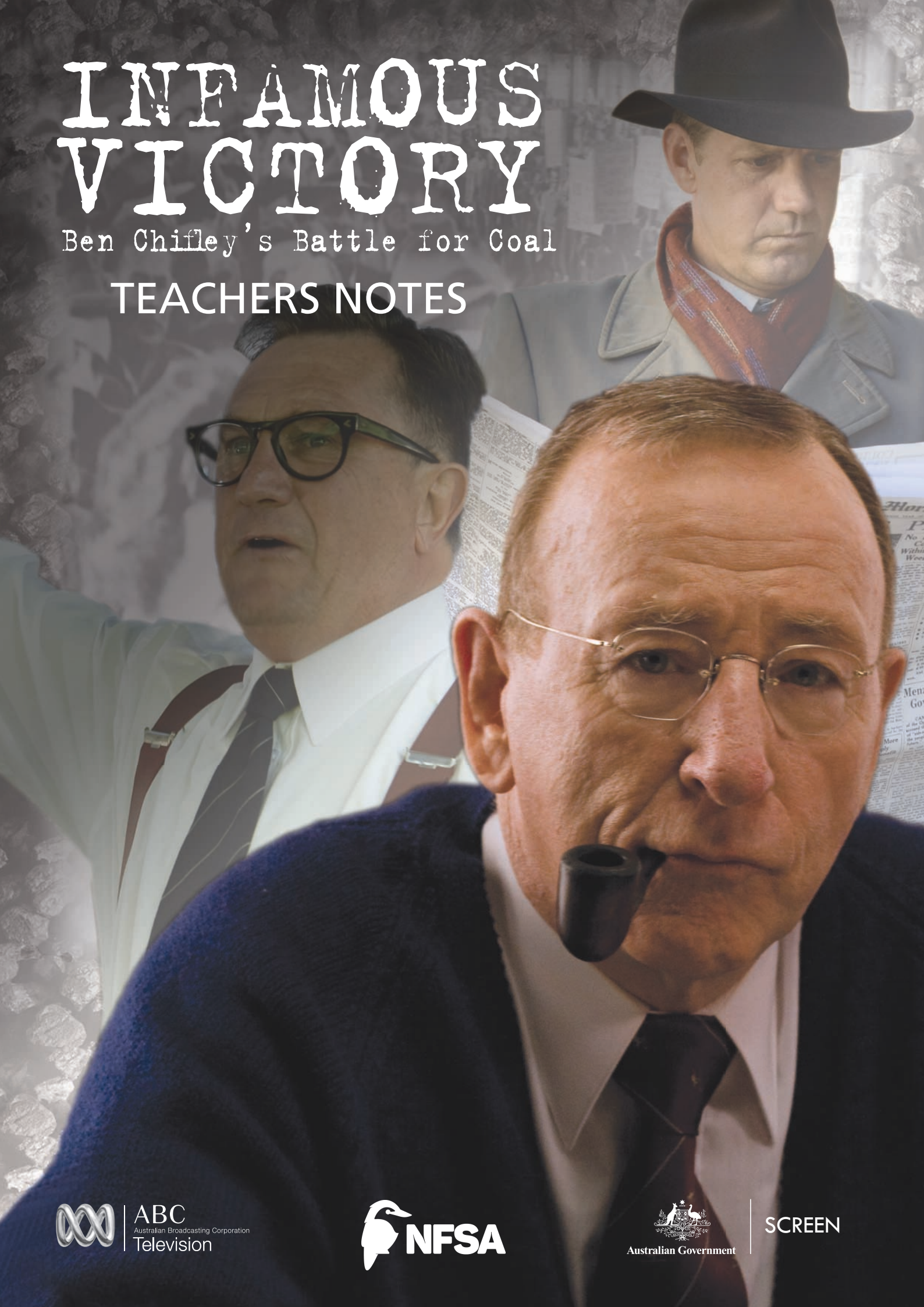


INFAMOUS VICTORY

Ben Chifley's Battle for Coal

TEACHERS NOTES



ABC
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Television



SCREEN

Synopsis

This is a story of coal, communism, and the Australian prime minister who went to war against his own during the national miners' strike of 1949.

Using rare archival footage and re-creations based on meticulous research, the dramatised documentary takes viewers into the corridors of power to show how Labor Party leader Ben Chifley took on and defeated the growing forces of communism in Australia.

The film examines the complex issues that the conflict raised and introduces the major players in the dispute, including Attorney-General Evatt, Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell, Chifley's 'spin doctor' Lloyd Ross and his brother Edgar Ross, a Communist Party executive and driving force behind the strike. It portrays a fascinating era of Australian history rarely seen on screen.

A former train driver from Bathurst, Chifley was a working-class hero, a Labor Party icon and 'man of the people'.

But his actions flew in the face of Labor values and tradition when he believed it was in the interests of post-war Australia. Chifley introduced draconian laws to prevent unions accessing funds to support the strike and sent in the army to replace striking miners—so defeating the Communist Party leadership that controlled the militant union.

It was a battle he was determined to fight and win in the interests of the nation, despite knowing it would probably cost him government.

Curriculum links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, History and SOSE/HSIE, Business/Work Studies, Legal Studies, Civics, and Politics.

Historical background and overview

To appreciate the reasons behind the Miners' Federation industrial strike of 1949, its immediate impact, the response of the Chifley Federal Labor Government to it, and its long-term ramifications, we should first look at the national and international context in which the strike took place.

- Ben Chifley became Prime Minister of Australia in July 1945, only weeks before the end of World War Two. From the program and from further research, discuss in class and write notes on why the Chifley Labor Government (1945-1949) and the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley himself, were considered by the Australian electorate to be popular and successful. Why did Chifley have such a high public reputation? What did he mean when he spoke in June 1949 of 'the light on the hill', and why have these words and their imagery since become part of Australian Labor Party history and lore? What had been the Labor Government's essential achievements in its vast program of post-war national rebuilding up to the time of the miners' strike in 1949? (See website references to 'Ben Chifley' and to 'The Light on the Hill'.)
- Carry out research and write a short definition and description of what has come to be known as the Cold War between the forces of western democracy, Christianity and capitalism and those of communism. What were the principal countries or world geo-political regions that were ideologically opposed to each other, and why? Where did Australia stand within these alignments, and who were its major political and military allies? Define the meaning and the general location of the 'Iron Curtain'. You may wish to draw a Cold War world map showing these general political and ideological alignments.
- Both from the program and from further research, discuss in class and make notes on the reasons for the growth and spread of Communist parties around the world during the 1940s. Also respond to the following:
 - What were the two major world events in 1949, referred to during the program, that contributed to a rise in Cold War tension, and what was the reaction of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) to these events, and to the international political situation generally?
 - Describe the CPA's general political, industrial, economic and social agenda for Australia and its citizens during the mid-late 1940s.
 - What influence did the CPA have over industrial trade unions such as the Miners' Federation, and why?
 - What was the Chifley Government's attitude and stance towards the CPA? What was the position of the Federal Liberal Party Opposition, led by Robert Menzies, toward the CPA?
 - What do you think the general attitude was of Australia's major mass media outlets, the national daily newspapers, to the CPA, and why?
- Discuss in class and write notes on Australia's reliance on coal and the coal mining industry in general during the 1940s (and in fact during the 20th century and into the 21st century). What long-term planning steps was the Chifley Government taking to reduce reliance on coal? In 1949, though, if coal production fell or even ceased for any reason such as a union strike or protracted bad weather, how would this spiral out to effect almost everyone in the entire

Australian community? You may wish to construct the importance of the relationship between coal and the Australian public at home, in the workplace and on public transport, in pictorial and diagrammatic fashion on poster paper.

- Find out what the working conditions of coal miners were like, both above and below ground, during the first half of the 20th century. Were they well paid in comparison to other people in the workforce? Did they have a right to expect better conditions after World War Two? Because of the community’s reliance on coal, were miners in a privileged position of power not enjoyed by other members of the workforce? Write a commentary on these questions in 400 words. (For details on the Rothbury coal miners’ working conditions, and the police shootings of 1929, see website references to ‘Rothbury’.)
- During the program we are informed that Ben Chifley believed that trade union disputes with management should be resolved through ‘arbitration’. Carry out research then discuss in class what this term means. What was the purpose of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court? From the program, make a note of the general wages and working conditions the Miners’ Federation had been bargaining for, prior to the trade union’s strike beginning 27 June 1949. How long had these matters been discussed in the Arbitration Court, and did it appear a resolution was likely or not through this method? Were there unreasonable delays? What was the unionists’ attitude to the way their arbitration case was progressing?
- Continuing from the previous activity, discuss in class how the Arbitration Court proceedings and the union’s claims for higher wages and improved conditions could be drawn upon to create two different newspaper letters to the editor, one from an official representing the mine operators, the other from a union secretary or president, each presenting their own case in the dispute. What are the arguments each party might present, and how would they go about countering the opposition arguments? Each letter should be about 200 words.
- As well as an impending coal strike, war-time petrol rationing had continued long after the war had finished in 1945, as mentioned during the program, annoying and frustrating the general public, oil companies and transport operators. Discuss in class and write a short commentary on the reasons for post-war petrol rationing. When did rationing officially end in Australia, and why? (See ‘Petrol rationing’ in website references.)

The main ‘players’

From the program and from further research if necessary, carry out the following activities on the central participants featured in *Infamous Victory*.

- Write a short biography of Ben Chifley covering important events and achievements in his life up to the time he became prime minister in 1945. Ensure that you explain the legislation he introduced into the Australian Parliament in 1931 concerning strike-breaking. What were the circumstances in which he was appointed prime minister?
- Write a short biography of Dr Herbert Vere (‘Doc’) Evatt, concentrating on his connections to the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and to the United Nations, which was created in 1945.
- Describe the relationship between Lloyd Ross and Edgar Ross, and their respective careers. In what way does the program indicate how they were politically aligned against each other over the 1949 coal mining strike?
- Write a short biographical commentary on the political career of Arthur Calwell. Offer an explanation as to why he was a strong critic of the CPA (as we see during the program).

Coal miners’ strike: protagonists, tactics, scenarios

The Miners’ Federation voted to strike on 27 June, then about seven weeks later voted to return to work on 9 August 1949. The ramifications of the strike were severe for the Labor Government, the union, the CPA and the general populace.

- From the program and any further research you have done, on poster paper create a timeline marking relevant and important decisions and events from the beginning of the strike to the result of the federal election on 10 December 1949. Give the poster an adequate title, and include explanatory notes and photographs or other illustrations as appropriate.
- When the coal miners’ strike began, the Chifley Government began to take steps to conserve the use of electricity and gas. Discuss in class the reasons for these measures, and the effects of them on the populace, especially in New South Wales. In what way did the winter weather in NSW contribute to the effects of the strike and to the Government’s actions? Explain why Edgar Ross, as presented in the program, interpreted the Government’s measures as benefiting his cause, the cause held by the CPA.
- Write an explanation as to why Edgar Ross accused the Government of being ‘baby starvers’. What was the role played by Dr Evatt in bringing about this reaction? Explain the twin purpose, as suggested during the program, of the emergency ‘fund-freezing’ legislation Chifley and Evatt introduced into Parliament. What was the extent of the fines imposed on citizens if they used too much electricity?
- With the public being caught in the middle between the actions and counter-actions of the Government and the miners’ union, imagine you are the nation’s prime minister. Discuss in class if necessary, then plan and write a set of personal diary entries in which you express your deepest thoughts and emotions about the entire situation. Take into

consideration that your long-held political view is to act in the interests of working people, and that it is these people who are suffering the most. Can you justify your actions even to yourself? Do you feel guilty? Do you think that your party could be voted out of office at the next election as a result of your actions? Would you be to blame if this happened? What possible alternatives are there for solving these national problems and still giving yourself a chance of winning the next election? Remember that you are expressing private thoughts and feelings not intended for impressing anyone else.

- Working in pairs, plan and write a discussion of about two or three minutes in duration between two citizens about the coal miners’ strike that could either be enacted to the class or recorded as a sound file for playback on your school’s intranet. The conversation may be between two miners, for example, or the wives, mothers or daughters of miners, or next-door neighbours, or two businessmen. Perhaps they hold the same views, perhaps their opinions conflict. Rehearse the written script and revise as necessary.
- Plan, draft, edit and complete a short fiction story based on the effect of the Government’s emergency fund freezing strike regulations relating to miners, their wives and children. Your choice of first or third-person narration may affect the viewpoint of the story, its emotional impact, and whether any reader sympathy is directed at particular characters.
- Examine the sequence from the program concerning the raid by the Commonwealth Investigation Service (CIS, the forerunner of ASIO) of Marx House, the Sydney headquarters of the CPA. Discuss in class the purpose of the raid. Was it successful? In pairs or small groups adapt this into a scene, or a sequence of scenes, for a comedy-drama film. Write a script outline for it. You may wish to construct this into a storyboard of simple illustrations of camera shots, with samples of dialogue and descriptions of sound effects and perhaps instructions for background or mood music.
- From the program, discuss in class the reasons for the jailing of miners’ union official Jock King, then later the jailing of Idris Williams and George Grant. You are the editor of the union newspaper. Write a 300-word editorial about one or other of these jailings. Consider viewpoint, argument, logic and emotion. For comparison, follow this by writing a 300-word editorial intended for a national daily newspaper. Ensure you take into account the intended audience of a national newspaper, and the attitude such a newspaper, controlled by private business interests, might take towards striking unionists.
- During a union meeting of rank and file members, an official stands up and delivers a speech of two to three minutes’ duration either in favour of continuing a strike, or in favour of ending it. The speech is designed to win the unionists’ votes one way or the other. Plan, write, practise and revise the speech if necessary, then deliver it to your class.
- An important background aspect of *Infamous Victory* relates to industrial workplace confrontation, negotiation and bargaining. When the negotiating parties walk away with a signed agreement they are both happy with, this is often summarised by the term, ‘You win, I win’. If teachers and students wish to pursue this further, they will find a collection of activities, adapted from TAFE course material for Negotiation Skills units, in the teachers’ notes on the documentary film, *The Fabric of a Dream – The Fletcher Jones Story* (Film Australia, 2006) in the section titled, ‘Fletcher Jones & Staff’. As well, see ‘Negotiation skills’ in website references.

Coal miners’ strike: bringing in the Army

The Chifley Government’s decision to use Army personnel to break the strike, by not only guarding the mines but digging out the coal as well, was highly contentious.

- From the program and from further research, discuss in class and write notes on the reasons the Chifley Government planned to use armed military troops to guard and work the coal mines and open cut coal fields during the 1949 strike. What were the possible advantages and disadvantages of such a decision, both short and long term? Why was it decided the soldiers should be armed? Explain why Chifley, in the words of the program narration, also “secretly offered the miners’ union everything they asked for”.
- We are informed during the program that some of the armed soldiers sent to the mines were ‘young and nervous recruits’ who had not experienced military conflict. Drawing on details in the program, plan and write a personal letter from a young recruit and a wife, girlfriend, old school friend or family member, about the recruit’s experiences, his thoughts and feelings about the work he has been ordered to carry out, and his observations of the general situation. Alternatively, write a set of personal diary entries.
- A radio news reporter at a mining site interviews a miner who is observing the soldiers going about their business. In pairs plan, write and record the interview. Revise, edit and record again if necessary. Consider the types of questions a reporter might ask, and why, and how the miner might respond.
- Write an explanation as to how and why the strike ended, and what the miners gained from their actions. Was it a ‘win-win’ outcome?
- Discuss in class then write a commentary of 400-500 words arguing whether Ben Chifley, as he had been accused, was ‘a traitor to Labor Party and working class traditions’ by using troops to break a trade union strike. Were his actions anti-democratic? Were his actions justifiable?

Aftermath and repercussions

The coal miners’ strike of 1949, and the way in which the Chifley Government responded to it, had long-lasting effects.

- From the program and any further research, what was the long-term outcome of the strike for the Communist Party of Australia? Where does the CPA stand in Australian politics and in trade union affairs today? Does it have an effective, relevant public voice in the Australian community?
- Research and write a commentary on the result of the 1949 federal election, offering reasons for the ‘landslide’ defeat of the Labor Government. In what ways did the continuation of the Cold War and fears of the ‘red menace’ during the succeeding years throughout the 1950s and 1960s keep Labor out of office until as long as 1972?
- Comment on the way the program raises the question of Ben Chifley’s health during the 1949 miners’ dispute. Why might this be a significant issue in understanding and interpreting the entire subject of the strike, its outcome, and its later effects?
- Examine whether the deployment of the Army during the 1949 union strike set a legal precedent of industrial relations confrontation for future governments to follow. Write a brief account of examples where Australian governments have, since 1949, either authorised the Army to intervene in a civilian industrial dispute, or have threatened to do so. In each case what were the reasons given, and were those reasons justified?
- For much of the 20th century it was a common saying that, ‘Coal is king’, a play on words of the nursery rhyme, *Old King Cole*. Discuss whether Australians still rely on coal production today as much as they did in the 1940s. Is coal still ‘king’? Have alternative uses of fuel and electricity for industry, transport and the home been developed since then? If a similar industrial dispute were to happen today, would we be better prepared to resolve it without causing discomfort and suffering to the general populace? (See ‘Coal is king’, website references.)
- Discuss in class whether the historical contents of *Infamous Victory* are of any relevance and importance to Australians today, many decades after the events depicted took place.
- What if? What if the coal miners’ strike of 1949 had never happened? Or what if the Army had never been called in to break the strike? What if the miners had been granted the wages and conditions they had campaigned for? Would Australian history have been any different from 1949 onwards, or would much of what occurred in Australia during the height of the Cold War have happened anyway? Could Australia have become a communist-led republic, for example? Discuss these questions in class, then in 500 words write your own, imagined view of the likely possibilities of an alternative chain of historical events. (Another way of approaching this may be to design a display of illustrated posters featuring an alternative history.)

Media studies

- Discuss in class then write your own explanation as to why the film is titled *Infamous Victory*. Provide an alternative title that you think might be suitable. Take into account the necessity of a title to inform and to attract the attention of a potential audience.
- *Infamous Victory* may be described as a dramatised documentary, or ‘docu-drama’. Define what this means, and in writing discuss the advantages and disadvantages of presenting the program in this way. How can we know that what we are seeing dramatised in the program is either accurate or authentic, fair to the real-life characters being portrayed, and based on existing, verifiable historical sources and records? One way of beginning to look into this question is to examine the program’s end credits: what do these tell us?
- Comment on the way the program presents and suggests the relationship between Ben Chifley and his secretary Phyllis Donnelly in terms of dialogue, setting, gesture and mise-en-scene. (For more on their relationship, see author David Day, listed in the book references section.)
- Discuss in class the relative objectivity or subjectivity of the two archival sequences of newsreel film presented in the program, about the use of the Army to break the strike. Is the newsreel biased? Write an alternative voice-over narration for these two sequences. Note that your narration would have to be timed to coincide with the running time of the newsreel footage and the way it has been edited.
- Plan and write your own news report, appearing on the front page of a national newspaper, on the governmental decision to send armed troops to dig coal. Use desktop publishing software to format the report, with headlines, column text, photographs and captions. Consider the way the entire presentation will be slanted in terms of viewpoint, attitude and emotional appeal. (Alternatively, working in pairs or small groups to construct a storyboard on poster paper for a newsreel report on the issue, ensuring the report has an introductory headline caption. Decide what the film report should contain visually, in camera shots, and the content and style of the voice-over narration.)
- Write a review of *Infamous Victory* in 350-450 words for a weekly TV newspaper supplement. Consider your intended reading audience.

References and Further Resources

Books and periodicals:

David Day, *Chifley*, HarperCollins, Pymble, NSW, 2001
 Phillip Deery, 'Chifley, the Army and the 1949 Coal Strike', in *Labor History*, No. 68, May 1995
 Phillip Deery, 'Communism, Security and the Cold War', in *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 54-55, 1997
 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, Allen Lane, London, 2006
 Carol Johnson, *The Labor Legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989
 LJ Louis, *Menzies' Cold War: A Reinterpretation*, Red Rag Publications, Carlton North, 2001
 David Lowe, *Menzies and the 'Great World Struggle': Australia's Cold War 1948-1954*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999
 Robert Manne, *The Shadow of 1917: Cold War Conflict in Australia*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1994
 Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: the Australian Labor Party, 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991

Play script:

Bob Ellis and Robin McLachlan, *A Local Man: A Play About Ben Chifley*, Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2005

Film/TV:

Documentary:

Pat Fiske (director), *Doc – A Portrait of Herbert Vere Evatt*, Film Australia, 1995
 Andrew Pike (director), *The Chifleys of Busby Street*, Ronin Films, 2008

Fictionalised TV mini-series:

Peter Fisk (director), *The True Believers*, ABC, 1988
 Ray Quint (director), *Bastard Boys*, Roadshow, 2007

Feature film:

Phillip Noyce (director), *Newsfront*, Roadshow, 1978

Websites:

Arthur Calwell:

www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130385b.htm

Ben Chifley:

<http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Chifley

www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130460b.htm?hilite=chifley

'Coal is king':

www.abc.net.au/landline/content/2006/s1848246.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_King_Cole

Coal miners' strike:

www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1372&Itemid=1

HV Evatt:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.V._Evatt

The Light on the Hill (various viewpoints):

www.abc.net.au/rural/telegraph/speeches/chifley.htm

http://workers.labor.net.au/17/c_historicalfeature_chifley.html

<http://www.greenleft.org.au/content/labors-ever-more-distant-light-hill>

Negotiation skills (use this search term to find more references):

<http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/search/site/Jobs%20Careers%20Jobseeker%20toolkit%20Negotiating%20conditions>

Petrol rationing:

www.awm.gov.au/journal/j36/petrol.asp

Lloyd Ross and Edgar Ross:

www.nla.gov.au/ms/findaids/3939.html

www.atua.org.au/archives/ALE1535a.htm

Rothbury:

www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2006/s1628014.htm

www.crowtrapstudio.com/chris_murals.htm

Infamous Victory

A Screen Australia Making History production. Produced in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Executive Producer: **Penny Robins**

Producer: **Perry Stapleton**

Director: **Geoff Burton**

Writers: **Geoff Burton, Bob Ellis**

Year: **2008**

Duration: **55 minutes**

Teachers notes written by Roger Stitson. Photography by Ian Barry and Marcus Filingier. © NFSA

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