



ISSN 2204-4779 (Print) 2204-4787 (Online) | No. 9 | September 2022

1954 Opening of the Victorian Parliament by the Queen

The eight-week 1954 royal tour of Australia by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh was an extremely successful leg of a six-month tour of Commonwealth countries.¹ The first visit to Australia by a reigning monarch was a ‘high-point of royal adulation’ and one of the ‘last great pre-television events’.² Anticipation levels were close to feverish, following lengthy delays caused by the postponement and cancellation of earlier royal tours, the death of King George VI in 1952 and the celebrated coronation of the young Queen in 1953.³ The packed itinerary for the Victorian section of the royal tour was followed eagerly by large and enthusiastic crowds at all public events, one of the highlights being the opening of the second session of the 39th Victorian Parliament by the Queen on 25 February 1954.⁴

Post-war tour plans

The marriage of King George VI’s eldest daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten (then given the title of Duke of Edinburgh) was celebrated around the world in November 1947.⁵ In honour of the royal wedding, Melbourne’s streets were decorated with flags, bunting and shop window displays, and the three-hour radio broadcast of the ceremony attracted a huge audience.⁶ Earlier in the year, *The Age* newspaper’s London correspondent had reported rumours that the King and Queen Elizabeth were considering a royal tour to express their appreciation for the wartime ‘solidarity of the British Commonwealth’.⁷

In March 1948, it was announced that the King, the Queen and their younger daughter, Princess Margaret, would visit Australia in early 1949, with Prime Minister Ben Chifley commenting that the news would give the ‘greatest satisfaction’ to all Australians.⁸ The federal government appointed Lieutenant-General Frank Berryman as director of the Australian royal visit and the Victorian State Cabinet established its own committee to make local tour arrangements.⁹ W. J. (Jack) Jungwirth, Secretary of the Premier’s Department, was

appointed as chief executive officer of the Victorian committee.¹⁰ Planning was well underway when the tour was cancelled in November 1948, owing to the King’s ill health.¹¹

The following year, there was speculation that the newly-elected Prime Minister Robert Menzies would invite the Royal family to visit Australia in 1951, after news that the King’s health had improved.¹² Shortly afterward, it was announced that 1952 was the more likely date for a tour that would include New Zealand and Australia.¹³ The 1952 tour was officially confirmed in September 1950, prompting the Melbourne Lord Mayor, Cr James Disney, to suggest that Melbourne should be given a ‘facelift’ in time for the royal visit.¹⁴

Despite his ongoing health concerns, the King approved the itinerary for the Australian tour in June 1951.¹⁵ The details of the full tour program were released by Prime Minister Menzies in September of that year, just days before the King underwent surgery for a lung condition.¹⁶ It was then only a matter of weeks before the King and Queen’s tour was cancelled on medical advice, along with the news that Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh would tour New Zealand and Australia in their stead.¹⁷ Tour planning officials

went to work immediately, revising and expanding the King's previously reduced schedule to include more events and visits to regional centres.¹⁸

Death of a sovereign—Victoria pays tribute

Princess Elizabeth and the Duke began the first stage of their Commonwealth tour on 31 January 1952 by flying to Nairobi, Kenya.¹⁹ Within a week, however, the Royal couple returned to England after receiving news of the death of King George VI, which plunged the Commonwealth into mourning.²⁰ The Australian Governor-General, Sir William McKell, was notified by cable that the planned royal visit was postponed.²¹

In Melbourne, a 56-gun salute was fired in the Domain Gardens by Australian Army personnel; each shot signified a year of the King's age.²² In a ceremony similar to one held in Canberra, the consequent accession to the throne of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was publicly proclaimed in Victoria from the steps of Parliament House on the afternoon of 8 February 1952 by the Governor, Sir Dallas Brooks.²³ At the conclusion of the ceremony, attended by Victorian parliamentarians and an estimated 10,000 members of the public, the band of the Royal Australian Navy, Flinders, played 'God Save the Queen'.²⁴ The dignity and simplicity of the service was praised in the press.²⁵

The Victorian Government issued a black-bordered *Gazette Extraordinary* on 7 February 1952, which became the first in a short series that outlined the protocols required to acknowledge the King's death, including flying all flags at half-mast and the tolling of church bells.²⁶ In addition, the King's representatives and ministers were required to be re-sworn to pledge allegiance to his successor.²⁷ The Victorian Chief Justice swore in the Governor who, in turn, swore in the Premier, John McDonald MLA, and the State Cabinet ministers.²⁸ The Victorian Parliament sat for an extraordinary session on 14 February to express condolences to the Royal family and to declare Members' loyalty to Queen Elizabeth II.²⁹

A nationwide two-minute silence was observed at noon on the day of the King's funeral, 15 February 1952, with power cut to the Melbourne tram network to stop all metropolitan trams for the duration.³⁰ The city 'froze into immobility' at 12 o'clock as all activity came to a standstill.³¹ The BBC broadcast of the King's funeral was relayed that evening by local radio stations.³²

On 17 February, the official Commonwealth day of mourning, the Victorian Parliament hosted one of many public memorial services organised to pay tribute to the late King.³³ The afternoon service was conducted outside Parliament House by the Archbishop of Melbourne, the Rev. J. J. Booth.³⁴ An 800-voice choir was accompanied by the Salvation Army Headquarters' staff band and a temporary cenotaph was placed at the foot of the Parliament House steps as a focal point for floral tributes and wreaths.³⁵ Undeterred by heavy rain, a crowd of 5,000 attended the solemn service and people continued to file past the cenotaph late into the night.³⁶

Tour dates and coronation attendance

After Prime Minister Menzies met with the new Queen at Buckingham Palace in May 1952, 'reliable sources' reported that the most likely date for a rescheduled Australian royal tour would be February 1954.³⁷ The Palace confirmed an outline of the tour dates in October 1952, with the tour due to arrive in New Zealand in January 1954, then continue in Australia from February to early April and include Ceylon on the return leg.³⁸ Premier McDonald said that the tour would help to further strengthen 'the ties of Empire and the people's affection for the Throne'.³⁹

In November 1952, the Victorian Government received an invitation for the Premier to attend the Queen's Coronation. The question of who would attend the event the following June was not settled until after the state election in December, when the Labor Party won government and John Cain (Snr) began his third term as Premier of Victoria.⁴⁰ By January 1953, the state and federal governments had agreed to observe a public holiday on 2 June, in order to celebrate both the coronation and the Queen's birthday.⁴¹ Premier Cain wrote to local officials around the state, asking them to arrange coronation functions, with 'Coronation Sunday' on 31 May chosen as the start of a week of festivities.⁴²

The Victorian executive committee, under the direction of the state tour director, Mr Jungwirth, began preliminary planning in February 1953 for the royal tour's Victorian leg.⁴³ Some engagements were pruned from the earlier program as the Queen's stay in Victoria was reduced from 12 days to ten days, including one rest day.⁴⁴ The dates shifted again, however, when Premier Cain agreed to changes so that the Queen and Duke could visit

Queensland in March instead of February, avoiding the worst of the summer humidity.⁴⁵

The final tour dates were approved in late February 1953, with Victoria's share of the royal tour to run from 24 February until 9 March 1954.⁴⁶ The Australian tour would begin in New South Wales on 3 February 1954, then continue to the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, with the Royal party scheduled to depart from Fremantle on 1 April.⁴⁷

The federal Minister-in-Charge of the Royal Tour, Eric Harrison MHR, acknowledged that the program for the Australian tour was arduous, but said it was necessary in order to fulfil the Queen's wish to 'see and be seen by as many of her people as possible'.⁴⁸ The minister sought to reassure the public that the tour program would be flexible enough to incorporate more rest days if it proved to be too demanding.⁴⁹ The program required the Queen and the Duke to travel 10,000 miles on 35 separate flights, as well as travelling hundreds of miles by car and train.⁵⁰ The logistics of the tour were staggering; organisers had to anticipate every contingency for the Royal party's extensive travels, as well as coordinate broadcasting arrangements for the national and overseas media.⁵¹

Premier Cain, along with the Leader of the Opposition, Trevor Oldham MLA, and Mr Jungwirth (in his capacity as Secretary of the Premier's Department) were nominated to attend the Queen's Coronation ceremony in London.⁵² The overseas trip caused the 1953 autumn session of Parliament to be shortened, running from March to the end of April, when the Premier departed for London by sea on the *SS Oronsay*.⁵³ Parliament was in recess until after the Premier returned to Australia in August, when sittings resumed for the Budget session in September.⁵⁴

Tragically, Mr Oldham and his wife, along with 41 others on their way to the coronation, were killed when their BOAC Comet airliner crashed soon after take-off from Calcutta, India.⁵⁵ A state memorial service for the Oldhams was held at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne on 6 May 1953.⁵⁶

Local coronation celebrations

Remarkably, an estimated 25,000 Australians made their way to London for the Queen's Coronation on 2 June 1953, easily accounting for Australia's full allocation of seats (at 30 guineas sterling each) along the route of the procession.⁵⁷ For those at home, there was no shortage of

coronation events in Melbourne and around Victoria.⁵⁸ Over 5,000 people filled the Exhibition Building for the Citizens' Coronation Commemoration on 31 May—Coronation Sunday—and Victorians flocked to other special church services, inspired by the Queen's request to 'Pray for me'.⁵⁹



Coronation decorations at Parliament House, 1953
(Photographer: Arthur Gordon Fraser.
Image: State Library of Victoria)

The night before the coronation, over 500,000 sightseers (and 30,000 cars) filled the streets of Melbourne to view floodlit buildings and illuminated shop windows, decorated with royal regalia, bunting and flags.⁶⁰ On the same night, the Victorian Government hosted a state dinner in honour of the coronation at the Royale Ballroom (in the Exhibition Building) for 400 invited guests, including the Governor, Members of Parliament, the judiciary and church representatives.⁶¹ On the day of the coronation, the Trooping the Colour military ceremony was conducted at the Carlton Cricket Ground by the Royal Melbourne Regiment, as a symbol of the Regiment's loyalty to the Queen.⁶² The Governor represented the Queen at the ceremony which was described as 'a salute to a sovereign'.⁶³

Sports fans had their own special coronation events on the 2 June holiday. The Victorian Football League conducted a 'coronation lightning premiership', which was decided in a series of 11 short football matches at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG); Richmond defeated St Kilda in the final, attended by 36,000 spectators.⁶⁴ Other events included a special Coronation Cup race at Flemington, the Victorian hardcourt tennis championship finals at St Kilda and a soccer game between the 'British Empire' and Italy held at Olympic Park.⁶⁵

All Victorian radio stations relayed the BBC broadcast of the Queen's Coronation, which began

in the early evening, Melbourne time.⁶⁶ Another huge crowd, estimated at over 600,000 and reported as the biggest ever seen in Melbourne, filled the city to overflowing on coronation night.⁶⁷ Surging crowds of joyful revellers jammed the streets, danced to the music provided by live bands and joined in with the National Square Dance Club, which performed in front of Parliament House.⁶⁸ Organisers called on the crowd to give three cheers for the newly-crowned Queen at 9.30pm.⁶⁹ The night of celebration was not without problems: ambulance staff attended to more than 700 people who fainted in the crush, shop windows were broken, goods were looted and 40 lost children were reunited with their parents.⁷⁰

The Melbourne City Council's Coronation Ball at the Town Hall on 4 June was the highest-profile social occasion of a large number of formal events held around Melbourne. A scenic backdrop of Windsor Castle dominated the Town Hall Ball, which was attended by over 2,700 formally-attired guests, with the prevailing mood described as patriotic 'fervour'.⁷¹ A coronation concert was performed at the Town Hall on 6 June by the Victorian Symphony Orchestra, featuring a program of English compositions.⁷² The Melbourne City Council's bill for their coronation celebrations came to £12,000, which contributed to a large deficit at the end of the financial year.⁷³

Two British feature films and a 20-minute documentary on the coronation were released, to some acclaim, in the following days: 'A Queen is crowned', 'Elizabeth is Queen' (screened at the State Theatre) and 'Coronation Day'.⁷⁴ Prime Minister Menzies' personal film footage of the London coronation festivities was shown in Melbourne as a Red Cross fundraiser in November 1953, with commentary provided by his daughter, Heather Menzies.⁷⁵

Tour preparations

When it reconvened, the Victorian Parliament agreed to an 'Address of Congratulation' to the Queen on the occasion of Her Majesty's Coronation, with Premier Cain remarking that everyone would welcome the Queen on her forthcoming visit to Australia and help to make it memorable.⁷⁶ Premier Cain and Cr Ferguson (chair of the Melbourne City Council Royal Tour Committee) both returned from London inspired with ideas to improve Melbourne's management of the royal tour, particularly in the areas of traffic

control, broadcasting, street cleaning and decorations.⁷⁷

The Royal couple began their Commonwealth tour by departing London for Jamaica, via Bermuda, on 23 November 1953 (leaving their young children Prince Charles and Princess Anne at home).⁷⁸ With only 15 weeks to go before the royal visitors arrived, the Victorian Minister for Public Works, Samuel Merrifield MLC, urged the public to become involved in helping to give Melbourne a 'facelift'.⁷⁹ As chair of the State Decorations and Illuminations Committee, Mr Merrifield provided guidance on 'decoration etiquette' by outlining which images and symbols of royalty could be represented appropriately in decorations and souvenirs.⁸⁰

Publications

The Minister-in-Charge of the Royal Tour, Eric Harrison MHR, oversaw the production of a booklet, *The Royal visit and you*, which went on sale around Australia in late December 1953.⁸¹ Nearly 50,000 copies were sold before the tour began.⁸² The illustrated booklet was intended to be an attractive souvenir that answered practical questions regarding what to wear and how to behave in the presence of royalty, as well as gently discouraging autograph hunters.⁸³ The impending tour prompted the publication of a vast number of features in newspapers and magazines, ranging from royal fashion tips to detailed accounts of the Queen's life story.⁸⁴

The royal visit also inspired a number of commemorative books, including *Royalty and Australia*, written by Rex Ingamells. In the book's foreword, Prime Minister Menzies wrote in glowing terms of the 'young and lovely Elizabeth the Second' being the focus of a 'profound nation-wide emotion' promoting kinship among all members of the Commonwealth.⁸⁵ Ingamells described each royal visit as a celebration, 'a firing and tempering anew' of real and spiritual links to the Crown.⁸⁶

'Operation Facelift'

Premier Cain expressed his hope that the Royal couple would see 'Victoria at its best and our people in a carnival mood'.⁸⁷ In late January 1954, Mr Merrifield informed the Premier that Melbourne promised to be a blaze of colour for the royal visit.⁸⁸ Melbourne's 'Operation Facelift' was a major undertaking which involved the 'painting, sandblasting, washing, scraping, furbishing, and

refurbishing of department stores, banks, hotels, pubs, large shops, small shops and establishments of every type'.⁸⁹ Giant decorative arches were constructed at major intersections in the city, adorned with oversized boomerangs and coronets, and City Council electricians rigged up over seven miles of wiring and 12,000 multi-coloured lights.⁹⁰ The rejuvenation of city buildings was said to be responsible for the greatest boom in the paint trade in more than 20 years.⁹¹



Bourke Street looking towards Parliament House during the royal tour of 1954 (Photographer: Mark Strzic. Image: State Library of Victoria)

The centrepiece of Parliament House's royal visit effort was a large decorative shield, a 40 ft. by 35 ft. coat of arms, that was erected on top of the Spring Street façade.⁹² *The Age* newspaper's editorial commented that the architectural lines of buildings such as Parliament House would have 'been better left unimpaired by the enthusiasm of the decorator'.⁹³

Parliament House, which was to host two visits by the Queen, was showing serious signs of age and neglect. *The Argus* newspaper reported that the roof leaked and the lift on the Legislative Council side of the building ('obsolete, rickety, unreliable') had been condemned.⁹⁴ Premier Cain was reluctant to spend a large amount on maintenance for Parliament House (after spending £20,000 to fix the front steps the previous year) at a time when there were so many demands for expenditure in the community.⁹⁵ Eventually, the lobbies on the Council side of the building were repainted and university students were employed to scrub floors prior to the royal visit.⁹⁶

Transport and rehearsals

Royal rail transport was not overlooked. The Victorian Royal train (last used by the Duke of Gloucester in 1934) was extensively refurbished, repainted in blue and gold, and the self-contained Royal car was upgraded, complete with

air-conditioning, fluorescent lighting and other modern innovations to make it 'the last word in comfort and design'.⁹⁷ The train had 31 staff and was equipped with its own switchboard and telephone system.⁹⁸ A test train was sent out to travel the route through Victorian regional towns, to verify timetables and allow local authorities to conduct their own rehearsals for the train's arrival.⁹⁹

Tens of thousands of people watched the final full-scale dress rehearsal of the 'Royal progress' along the route from Essendon airport (where the Queen would arrive) to Government House on 21 February 1954, despite it taking place in the early hours of Sunday morning.¹⁰⁰ The timing was assessed as 'near perfect', with only minor delays over the 11.4 mile route.¹⁰¹ The rehearsal involved royal tour officials, the Governor and state ministers, the state car fleet, the police motorcycle and mounted escorts and the Department of Civil Aviation.¹⁰² At least 2,000 people positioned themselves in front of Parliament House to see the last rehearsal.¹⁰³

Later the same day, half a million sightseers poured into the city to see the illuminated city buildings (the 'big free show'), requiring police to call in reinforcements to handle the crowds and traffic.¹⁰⁴ It was claimed that Melbourne's after-dark decorations made it the 'brightest city in Australia'.¹⁰⁵ The transformation of the city centre from 'drab' to 'fairylend' had been achieved; a profusion of royal motifs, flags, bunting, arches, flowers and lights combined to create a colourful and festive atmosphere.¹⁰⁶ Broadcast loudspeakers were attached to poles throughout the city and the light show ran each night until 11.30pm.¹⁰⁷

Exuberant crowds greet the Queen in Sydney

The Queen's arrival in Australia on 3 February 1954, sailing on the SS *Gothic* into Sydney Harbour, was welcomed with great warmth and enthusiasm.¹⁰⁸ The royal tour had already met with great success in Jamaica, Panama, Fiji, Tonga and New Zealand. The Royal couple received a tumultuous greeting in Sydney from crowds estimated at well over one million, crowded onto harbour vantage points and in the city streets.¹⁰⁹ The arrival of the reigning monarch was viewed as a significant milestone in Australia's history, with the Queen's welcome described by ABC commentators as the 'grand climax' and by *The Age* newspaper as a 'truly historic event'.¹¹⁰

The wildly enthusiastic Sydney reception occasionally tipped over into chaos with the Queen's car being mobbed on the grid-locked streets and large numbers of people fainting.¹¹¹ With crowd injuries increasing with each public appearance of the Royal couple, mounted police and army personnel numbers were boosted to help maintain order, while public officials pleaded for calm.¹¹² The Melbourne newspapers were quick to seize on the 'mass hysteria and selfish scrambling' of Sydneysiders, saying that Melbourne's 'proven record' of good behaviour would be maintained when the Royal couple came to town.¹¹³ The same article mentioned that all leave for Melbourne police had been cancelled for the royal visit and an extra 1,500 police would help with crowd control.¹¹⁴

After completing a strenuous program of events in New South Wales, the Queen opened the third session of the 20th Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia in Canberra.¹¹⁵ At an official banquet, Prime Minister Menzies presented the Queen with a gift on behalf of all Australians—a diamond brooch in the shape of a spray of wattle blossom and tea-tree flowers.¹¹⁶ The brooch, comprised of 150 blue-white and yellow diamonds with an estimated value of £25,000, had been commissioned in Melbourne by the jewellers William Drummond and Company.¹¹⁷

The following four-day royal tour of Tasmania was conducted in a more 'restful atmosphere', although crowds still thronged the streets to see the Queen.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, in Melbourne, a brewery dispute that had caused weeks of beer rationing at most Victorian hotels had been resolved; fortunately it did not affect Carlton and United Breweries' plans to produce specially marked 13-ounce bottles of beer to commemorate the royal visit.¹¹⁹

The Queen arrives in Victoria

Finally, on the afternoon of 24 February 1954, it was Victoria's turn to host the royal tour. The day of the Queen's arrival in Melbourne was proclaimed a public holiday, with country centres also granted holidays to coincide with the royal tour to each region.¹²⁰ The Melbourne newspapers published detailed, to-the-minute timings for the Royal progress and *The Age* committed to producing a daily map and program outlining the Queen's movements.¹²¹ Radio commentators from the ABC and commercial stations combined to

provide a three-hour program on the arrival of the Queen and the Duke.¹²²

Hundreds of people camped out overnight along the route of the Royal progress from Essendon to Government House, to secure the best vantage spots to see the Queen.¹²³ By 9pm the night before, over 100 people had set up camp beside barricades outside Parliament House, the majority equipped with sleeping bags, picnics and umbrellas to ward off the rain.¹²⁴ Many people (predominantly women, it was noted in the papers) claimed prime positions all around the city, including outside the Town Hall and Post Office.¹²⁵



Crowd gathered in front of Parliament House during the royal tour of 1954 (Photographer: Mark Strizic. Image: State Library of Victoria)

As the Queen stepped out of the ANA Skymaster at Essendon airport she was met by the Governor, Premier Cain and the cheers of the assembled crowd.¹²⁶ After inspecting a naval guard of honour, a number of dignitaries were presented to the Queen, including Cabinet ministers, party leaders, members of the judiciary and tour officials.¹²⁷ The motor cavalcade then began its long journey into the city, cheered by a joyous crowd estimated at 750,000; the route took in stops at the Essendon Town Hall, Parliament House and the Melbourne Town Hall before arriving at Government House.¹²⁸

A brief visit to Parliament House

Only 20 minutes were allocated in the program for the Queen's first visit to Parliament House. The Royal couple arrived to the cheers of 100,000 people, who let out a 'frenzied roar' as the official cars approached.¹²⁹ The Queen and Duke acknowledged the crowd as they were preceded up the Spring Street steps by the Usher of the Black Rod (Mr J. J. Tierney) and the Sergeant-at-Arms (Mr L. G. McDonald) carrying the mace.¹³⁰ The Royal standard was 'broken' from the centre flagstaff on the roof of Parliament House and the crowd (which spontaneously sang 'God Save the

Queen') settled as the Royal couple entered the building. Ambulance workers were kept busy attending to dozens of people who fainted from either exhaustion or excitement.¹³¹

The purpose of the brief visit was for the Queen to receive a joint Address of Welcome from the Parliament, which had been agreed by both houses on 11 December 1953.¹³² The President of the Legislative Council, Sir Clifden Eager MLC, read the joint address to the 200 guests assembled in Queen's Hall and, in her reply, the Queen gave thanks for the welcome and the expressions of 'loyalty and devotion'.¹³³

The Royal party, including the President and the Speaker, P. K. Sutton MLA, their wives and the Premier's wife, Mrs Cain, adjourned for ten minutes of refreshments (cups of tea) in the President's suite.¹³⁴ The Royal progress then continued on to the Town Hall, where the enormous crowd was kept under control until the moment after the Queen's car left for Government House, when a surge of people broke through the police cordon.¹³⁵

An historic side note to the Queen's first visit was the use of two carved mahogany chairs which had been used when the Queen's grandfather opened the first session of the Commonwealth Parliament in the Exhibition Building in 1901.¹³⁶ There was also a 'near miss', when a piece of plaster the size of a cricket ball fell from the Queen's Hall ceiling only minutes before the Queen was due to walk through.¹³⁷ The debris was whisked away by attendants in the nick of time.¹³⁸ It was later reported that the President had given the Queen and Duke a fleeting preview of the Council Chamber, to help familiarise them for their return visit the following day.¹³⁹



Crowd on the Spring Street steps of Parliament House, awaiting arrival of the Queen (Photograph: Department of Lands and Survey. Image: Parliament of Victoria)

The opening of the Victorian Parliament

The next day, 25 February 1954, the Queen returned to Parliament House to open the second session of the 39th Victorian Parliament.¹⁴⁰ Parliament had been prorogued by proclamation to allow the Queen to formally participate in the opening ceremony, which was the only way it could be arranged mid-way through the Government's term.¹⁴¹ In terms of events it was possibly the biggest day of the Australian royal tour, as it also included an assembly of ex-service personnel at the MCG and a ball at Government House that evening.¹⁴²

Another huge crowd jammed into Spring and Bourke Streets to greet the Queen and Duke as they arrived at Parliament House.¹⁴³ Before the arrival of the official party, about 40 police had battled to restore order after a surging crowd broke through a gap in the barricades; there were reports that police horses were ridden into the crowd, injuring several women.¹⁴⁴ The police presence was not enough to deter a 'frail, elderly' woman from scaling an eight-foot fence (with some assistance) to leap into the gardens at Parliament House.¹⁴⁵

The Council chamber was packed with state and federal Members, including Prime Minister Menzies and Federal Opposition Leader Dr Evatt, as well as the Melbourne Lord Mayor (Cr Robert Solly) and members of the judiciary, church dignitaries, armed services leaders and consular representatives.¹⁴⁶ Despite 20 tons of ice being used in the cooling system, the Council chamber was very warm, with banks of powerful floodlights generating heat. The flutter of programs being used as fans could be heard in quiet moments before the Queen entered, along with the whirr of newsreel cameras.¹⁴⁷ Five hundred more guests were crowded into Queen's Hall to witness the event.¹⁴⁸

A fanfare from eight RAAF trumpeters above Queen's Hall accompanied the Queen's entrance to the Council Chamber.¹⁴⁹ The Queen passed through a sea of bowing and curtsying guests before she took her place in the Vice-Regal Chair on the dais. Wearing an off-white gown of silk brocade and the blue sash of the Order of the Garter, the Queen was flanked by the Duke (in the uniform of Admiral of the Fleet) and the President.¹⁵⁰ Both the President and the Speaker ('against his own best wishes and those of his [Labor] party') wore full Windsor Court dress on the day, which included lace ruffs and cuffs, knee



Opening of the Victorian Parliament by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 25th February 1954
(Image: Parliament of Victoria)

breeches, stockings, buckled shoes, silk gown and full wig.¹⁵¹

At 2.30pm, the Queen asked the President to request the immediate attendance of the Speaker and the Legislative Assembly Members in the chamber.¹⁵² To streamline arrangements, most of the Assembly Members were already seated in the Council, leaving the Speaker, the Premier and party leaders to answer the Queen's summons.¹⁵³ When they arrived, the Queen then read out a short speech (in a 'soft, clear voice') that declared the session of Parliament open.¹⁵⁴ In her speech, the Queen welcomed the opportunity to exercise her 'historic privilege' in Victoria and broadly outlined the forthcoming program of legislation.¹⁵⁵ The Queen's private secretary provided copies of the speech to the President and the Speaker before the Royal party left the chamber.¹⁵⁶

Reception in the Library

The sitting was suspended until later that day in each house. In the interim, the Queen and Duke paused for afternoon tea in the President's Suite, then moved to the Parliamentary Library where

they received (non-Cabinet) Members of both houses, as well as senior parliamentary officers. Over 200 people were presented to the Queen in a short space of time. The Queen greeted the Librarian, Mr Eric Frazer, by complimenting him on the 'beautiful library'.¹⁵⁷

The invitations for Members allowed them to bring their wives; those Members who were not married, or were widowers, could be accompanied by 'their nearest female relative'.¹⁵⁸ The Member for Preston, William Ruthven MLA, met the Queen as one of her 'soldiers', having been awarded the Victoria Cross during the First World War.¹⁵⁹ By 3.30pm, the Queen and the Royal party were escorted back to the front steps to depart from Parliament House, which generated a 'renewed burst of frenzied cheering' from the waiting crowd.¹⁶⁰

Address-in-Reply

When Parliament resumed after 5pm, a motion for the Address-in-Reply to the Queen's speech was moved by Premier Cain in the Assembly and by the Minister for Transport, Patrick Coleman MLC, in the



The Queen and Duke receiving Victorian Members of Parliament in the Parliamentary Library, Melbourne
(Image: Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne)

Council.¹⁶¹ Breaking with tradition, the speakers in both houses were not the newest Members of Parliament, but the party leaders.¹⁶² The decision was welcomed by Opposition Leader Henry Bolte MLA, who was invited by the Premier to second the motion, on what Mr Bolte described as a 'red letter day in the life of government in ... Victoria'.¹⁶³ Premier Cain said that the grace and charm of the 'young and smiling' Queen ('the very embodiment of our great democracy and our parliamentary institution') had won the hearts of the people of Victoria.¹⁶⁴

Carried out with 'fitting pomp and meticulous attention to detail', the ceremonial 1954 opening of Parliament was the first in Victoria's history to be conducted by a reigning sovereign.¹⁶⁵ The short ceremony was described as a 'dazzling spectacle', with the ornate and colourful Council chamber the scene for an event 'never to be forgotten'.¹⁶⁶

Ex-service personnel and the Government House Ball

Later that afternoon, the Queen and Duke attended the MCG for an assembly of 70,000 ex-service men and women's organisations, Legacy wards and war widows.¹⁶⁷ The event was organised on behalf of the state government by the Returned and Services League of Australia, in conjunction with 40 ex-service organisations.¹⁶⁸ The Royal couple toured the arena in an open Land Rover, watched a display of marching girls and chatted with war veterans. Thunderous applause from the cheering crowd held up the Duke's speech, which praised Australian veterans for their courage and valour.¹⁶⁹

The Royal Ball took place at Government House that night, with 1,200 guests invited by the Governor and Lady Brooks.¹⁷⁰ A traffic jam caused some delays, but once inside the grounds, the guests were treated to a spectacular light show, dancing and refreshments.¹⁷¹ The Queen was

reported to have enjoyed her conversations with the VIPs, including the Prime Minister, the Governor, the Premier and their wives.¹⁷²

Other events on the Victorian program

The official program was crowded for the remainder of the Queen's visit to Victoria.¹⁷³ It included attendance at a race meeting at Flemington, a tennis match at Kooyong and a State Banquet at the Royale Ballroom, where Premier Cain presented the Queen with a solid gold rose bowl (made from Victorian gold) as a gift from the people of Victoria.¹⁷⁴ In front of an enormous but 'reverently silent' crowd, the Queen dedicated a new forecourt memorial at the Shrine of Remembrance and noted that her uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, had dedicated the Shrine itself on Armistice Day 1934.¹⁷⁵

The Queen and Duke attended a performance of *Tales of Hoffman*, staged at the Princess Theatre by the National Theatre Movement's opera company.¹⁷⁶ Over 600 women, representing 175 women's organisations, enjoyed lunch with the Queen at St Kilda Town Hall.¹⁷⁷ The Royal train was put to good use, transporting the Royal couple to a large number of Victorian regional centres including Ballarat, Geelong and Sale.¹⁷⁸ After a whirlwind of garden parties, children's events and investitures, the Queen and Duke did have some free time at O'Shannassy Lodge near Warburton, before their final Victorian engagement at a 'glittering' state reception on their last night in Melbourne, attended by nearly 7,000 guests.¹⁷⁹

The Queen leaves Victoria

On 9 March 1954, the Queen left Victoria for Queensland, after telling the Lord Mayor that she'd had a wonderful time and 'enjoyed everything'.¹⁸⁰ Once again the route of the Royal progress to Essendon airport was packed with well-wishers and the tarmac filled with officials, with Premier Cain leading the official farewell party.¹⁸¹ It was not long before Mr Jungwirth, the Victorian tour director, was being congratulated on the success of his planning and the arrangements in Victoria were trumpeted as being 'superior'.¹⁸² Premier Cain refused honours from the Queen for local tour officials (on the grounds of Labor Party policy) at the immediate conclusion of the tour, but

Mr Jungwirth was knighted in 1957 for his royal tour efforts.¹⁸³

Parliament House hosted a travelling exhibition of the Queen's Coronation robes, which were displayed in Queen's Hall between 10 and 23 March. The exhibition had been arranged in collaboration with Westminster Abbey authorities and UK officials.¹⁸⁴ Police were stationed on a 24-hour watch to safeguard the exhibits, shown with the added attraction of the Queen's Hall mosaic floor (revealed when the carpet was removed for repairs).¹⁸⁵ As royal tour decorations were dismantled in the city, the Coronation robes exhibit drew large crowds, notably 15,000 visitors on the final day.¹⁸⁶

London bound

After completing the rest of the tour program in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, the Queen and Duke departed Australia from Fremantle aboard the *SS Gothic* on 1 April 1954.¹⁸⁷ The Queen's farewell broadcast, made aboard the *SS Gothic*, remarked upon the Royal couple's 'abiding admiration' for Australia and its people.¹⁸⁸ The Royal couple returned home after visits to Ceylon, Aden, Uganda and Malta (where they reunited with their children), then via Gibraltar to London, arriving home in mid-May 1954.¹⁸⁹ Their six-month royal tour of the Commonwealth was at last complete.

In her eight weeks in Australia, the Queen visited every state and the Australian Capital Territory, including 70 country towns, delivered nearly 100 speeches, opened five parliaments and travelled over 43,000 miles by car, train, aeroplane and boat to reach a large number of formal engagements; it was estimated that three-quarters of Australia's population of nine million people made the effort to catch at least one glimpse of the Queen and Duke during the 1954 tour.¹⁹⁰ The Queen would make another 15 visits to Australia over the next 57 years, remaining one of the most popular members of the Royal family.¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, the assessment made by *The Age* newspaper at the end of the extraordinarily successful 1954 royal tour has held true: there could 'never be another like it'.¹⁹²

Author

Debra Reeves
 Parliamentary Library & Information Service,
 Department of Parliamentary Services
 Parliament House, Spring Street, Melbourne
 Telephone: (03) 9651 8640
 Email: research@parliament.vic.gov.au

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Endnotes

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Suggested citation

Reeves, D. (2022) *1954 Opening of the Victorian Parliament by the Queen*, Parliamentary Library & Information Service, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria.

Acknowledgements

The Parliament of Victoria Library acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

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