





# THE GOLDEN ERA

**Suzie McErvale**

Head of Development and Marketing

*From 16-year-old Channel 9 Office boy to leading drama Director, Class of 1964 past student David E Charles understands the value in getting things “just right” for the optimum outcome.*

*Working alongside entertainment industry icons, Graham Kennedy and Tony Charlton, David flourished under the pressure of the behind-the-scenes action that brought the Golden Era to households around the country.*

*Motivated to reach further and fulfil his inherent passion for politics, David branched off from his directing career on 18 October, 1980, when he became the first past pupil to enter Federal Politics as Member for Isaacs.*

*In an insightful and honest interview, David shares how leaps of faith in his life have proved to generate some of his greatest achievements, and how staying true to the Salesian ethos of love and Christianity remain two of the most important ingredients to achieving success.*

## **Leaving school at the age of 16, you entered the entertainment industry. What attracted you to show business?**

In the year '64, my family and I went to watch a television game show in the Channel 7 Studios. I remember thinking, 'Geez, this is fascinating', with all the cameras and moving lights. It was at this point that I began to consider a career in the television industry as a possible pathway to pursue. Being 16, I hadn't made up my mind about a lot of things, career included. It would be remiss of me not to mention that this was up to half a century ago, and things were completely different from what they are today. After this experience, I wrote to Channel 9 and Channel 7, and I received some nice letters in return.

Despite not intentionally looking to leave school at the time, as I flicked through The Sun in the September of '64, I noticed an ad looking for an 'office boy', and I said to Mum, "Can I?". I went into the Nine Network and met with an executive at the time, who interviewed me. After a while, he looked at what I'd written and asked, "Salesian College... is that a Catholic College?" When I answered, "Yes", he asked, "When can you start?" It was clear that the Catholic ethos resonated with him, and set me apart from the other candidates. This moment remains a strong memory.

I had agreed to the arrangement that I go back to school

and sit my last exams before leaving to begin work. As an 'office boy', part of my job was to deliver the mail and messages around Channel 9, as well as take on odd jobs to help people out. There were about three of us in the post room, along with the people who sold the tickets.

It was Channel 9's process that after so many months (it could be 3, 6 or 9 months), you would be moved on to be trained in an area you were interested in. For me, that was the Production Department. At about the 7 month mark, I progressed into the 'Stage Hand' area in Props. After a couple of years, I received a promotion to be a Cameraman/Floor Manager. Being a Floor Manager suited me and my personality to a tee. I loved getting things done.

## **During your television years, you had the opportunity to work with industry icons like Graham Kennedy and Tony Charlton. What are your memories of working with stars like these, and what did you learn?**

I met Tony Charlton as a 16 year old, before the start of the '65 Football season. I knocked on Tony's door and introduced myself, and asked if there was any part-time work with the Sports Department. It was one of those times when things just fell into place. Four or five weeks into the season, I received a phone call asking that I go and see Tony. As it happened, the statistician who had been with him from the start resigned. Charlton's next



move was picking up the phone, asking me to start. All of a sudden I was sitting up in the box, next to Charlton and others like Jim Taylor (South Melbourne ruckman). I remember sitting there during the finals, doing the stats and pinching myself, thinking, "I'm getting paid for this!". That really began the sporting aspect of my career, and I continued on to work in tennis, golf as well as producing a football program. Shortly after this, I took a promotion to work on 'In Melbourne Tonight' with the great Graham Kennedy.

Kennedy and Charlton had very similar outlooks; they demanded perfection, and this is what the Channel 9 approach was under the Packers. 'Near enough' wasn't good enough. Everything had to be just right. It had to be 100%. Once in a while, something unexpected might happen that took you by surprise, but the other 99.9% of the time, perfection was expected. It had to be right behind the camera for it to be right in front of the camera. If we were shoddy behind the scenes, it would show up. That worked for me just fine, as perfection was also the outcome I wanted.

#### **How did you adjust to experiencing that pressure as a teenager?**

I knew straight away the role was the right fit for me. Adjusting wasn't an issue. The Packers and the people I worked with all wanted perfection, and that suited me, so we got on very well. Following my time with Channel 9 I went on to Crawford Productions, and that was the right fit too. These experiences really did allow me to become one of the most experienced drama directors in Australia.

In my experience, if you had a logical argument with good reason, and articulated that to Kerry Packer, he would listen. He was passionate about television and demanded the best in the business, the best actors, the best talent, the best staff. If he didn't have them on his team, he'd pay for them to come over. He understood the bigger picture. He saw people as the main ingredient, an absolute necessity and source of the business. There's no doubt these



were the reasons behind why Channel 9 experienced its Golden Era.

#### **Working for the Nine Network under the Packer Family taught you quickly about the value of work ethic, and encouraged you to deliver the best results possible. How did this experience shape you as a young man?**

I can see how some people might have been terrified about getting it right, but for me it worked. I thought, "Right, I can do this. I know what he is talking about, so I'm going to put every effort into doing this right". Life was good. I remember one Monday night in the 60s saying goodbye to Kennedy at the end of my shift. Wednesday of that week we had a big special at the Myer Music Bowl scheduled, but for some reason I wasn't rostered on. When Graham found out I wasn't rostered, he commented, "Don't make any plans, will you?". The next morning Channel 9 rang, asking me to work the shift. Whatever Graham said went. He trusted me, and believed that I'd make the right calls. I probably didn't understand the magnitude of this trust at the time. I loved working with Graham. He was very good to me. While Tony Charlton and I were politically complete opposites, we still caught up for lunch in

latter years. Things were good between us. You can overcome most things in life if you maintain good relationships. I certainly believe that.

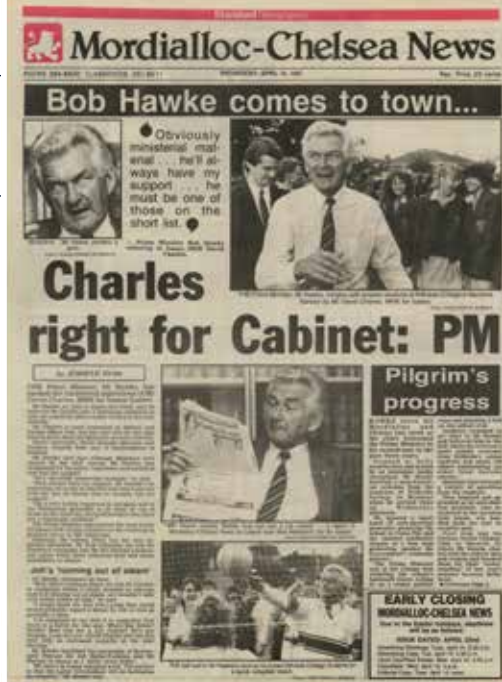
#### **In the early 1980s, there lay a 'fork in the road', and you had to choose between heading to Hollywood to further pursue your career in entertainment, or to enter Australian National Politics. You chose politics, and were soon after elected as Federal Member for Isaacs on 18 October, 1980. How did you make this decision, and if you had your time over, would you do it the same way again?**

I came to this 'fork in the road' when I was around 24 or 25, after I had been involved with the Australian Labor Party while I was still directing in the television industry. I became involved with the Labor Party because I'd always been interested in politics. I grew up in a working class family who felt very comfortable talking about politics and religion.

In 1979 my wife and I moved to Black Rock. I was confident that I could get the votes there, as I also had strong Union backing. Coupled with the fact that I didn't want to grow old saying, "I could have done that", I said to myself, "Have



Directed by David Charles, Division 4 was one of Australia's most popular television shows in the 1970's. Pictured: Terence Donovan and Gerard Kennedy.



me the most were people like Fr Cornell and Br Peter Swain. The person with the most influence during my time, though, was Fr Bill Edwards. He was phenomenal. Everyone in the school knew him. He came from the western suburbs in Sydney. I remember him speaking about one of the Premiers who used to take up the collection at Mass when he was growing up. Clearly, this Premier had an impact on him, and no doubt shaped the path he took with helping others.

Fr Bill Edwards was a profound teacher. He had a real knack with communicating with people of all ages. Everyone understood what he was saying. He was known for always being around the grounds, and being present among the students. Every now and then he would walk up to you and ask with good intent, "How's your soul?" Some kids wouldn't usually accept that question, but with Fr Bill Edwards, they did – he was different. People knew he was one of them, like an older brother or great friend. Consequently, when he asked the question, people would genuinely reflect. He had great influence. I came back to see him a few times before he passed. You wouldn't catch one person who said a bad thing about him. I feel extremely fortunate to have known him.

Similar to the Packers' ethos of hard work, dedication and perfection, the life lesson that I learnt here was the Salesian ethos of being a good person and a Christian. This ethos modelled a good set of values that I was able to stay true to throughout my life. It is this ethos that has been fundamental to my development, and I thank the Salesians for that. Speaking and listening to people, talking about religion and faith, is something I've always believed to be necessary within our society. There has to be a Christian outlook on life. It can't be solely academic. There needs to be a soul to it.

**Thank you, David for your time, it's been a pleasure.**

a go". I knew that if I didn't have a go, I needed to branch out and follow Peter Weir to Hollywood. As it happened, I won the preselection, and Peter Weir went on to direct legendary films such as Gallipoli.

Politics was hard work. For six months of the year I was away from home. A lot of people don't want to do it, and you can understand that as it takes a big toll. In Federal Parliament around '87, '88, there were five former State Premiers/State Opposition Leaders on the backbench. People very rarely walk in and go to the top, unless they are special. Federal Politics is a tough game. Often there were people who would get up and tell lies. They would say anything, and the minute they were proved wrong, they would answer, "Oh, sorry, that's right". Those times were challenging. Federal politics was cut throat, and it didn't take any prisoners.

*David was appointed as Chairman of the Hawke government's 'Foreign Affairs, Trade & Defence Committee'. He was also a member of the Parliament's 'Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade Committee' and chaired several major reports to the Parliament, including 'Disarmament and Arms Control in the Nuclear Age'. Among many submissions to the committee, David met with senior officials from the United States and the Soviet Union. According to David, those meetings were "very, very interesting".*

*The second major report was 'Australia's Relations with the South Pacific'. This report became the Bible for South Pacific nations and their relations with Australia for many years. This report involved travelling in an RAAF plane for several weeks around*

*the Pacific Nations, meeting with Prime Ministers and other senior ministers. One important meeting was with the then Leader of Fiji, Major General Rabuka, who led the military coup that ousted the elected Fijian government in the 1980's.*

*On leaving Parliament, Prime Minister Bob Hawke appointed David as the Australian Consul General at San Francisco. David served there from 1990 to 1993. During his time in San Francisco David met many political and commercial people important to Australia, including a young Bill Clinton who was to become President of the United States 12 months later.*

#### **What advice do you have for today's students, keen to succeed?**

If I were advising students today, I would be suggesting two main points:

1. Do your best academically and culturally (in areas such as music), because you have to be able to provide for yourself in order to get through life. You've got about 60 years when you leave here to go and do things, so those skills are crucial.
2. At the same time, do your best to invest yourself in the Salesian ethos of love and Christianity, and always think of others.

Reaching the top academically is one thing, but if you're not a good person, you have nothing.

#### **Who were the people who had the biggest influence in allowing you to reach your potential during your College years?**

While there were a few people of significance, the ones who stood out to