

The view from the hill top

Peter Thomson, former headmaster of Timbertop, has been a mentor to hundreds — among them Tony Blair of the British Labour Party. **Jake Niall reports.**

TO find Peter Thomson, a four-wheel drive vehicle is an advantage. The drive to his small property in Merrijig, near Mount Buller, might be intoxicating for its views, but it's also steep, bumpy and not for the faint-hearted. It's a worthy test because Peter Thomson is not for the faint-hearted either.

Thomson is gregarious, friendly and remarkably frank — occasionally even profane — for a man of the cloth. He likes physical challenges, vigorous discussions and cigarettes. If he was in South America and Catholic, he might be a liberation theologian — a leftist priest who believes in practical, institutional change to help the poor and happily roughs it with the rebels in the hills.

Thomson has long departed from the top job at Timbertop, the school best known for educating Prince Charles. He is now just a part-time farmer, who shares 40 hectares at



A long way from England: British Labour leader Tony Blair and his wife, Cherie, in Mansfield, late last year. **Picture: MICHAEL RAYNER**

the top of the hill with wife Helen, who smilingly insists she "made him" return to his old stamping ground five years ago after a stint as master of St Mark's College at Adelaide University. But his most significant influence may be yet to come, despite his retirement from education and as an active priest in the Church of England.

THOMSON'S close friend, Tony Blair, is among those to have negotiated the steep drive up to Pete's place in recent weeks. Blair is clearly not faint-hearted — he cannot afford to be if he is to lead Britain into the 21st century and drag the British Labour Party into government for the first time in 17 years.

The story of Peter Thomson and Tony Blair shows how friendship can be maintained over a long time, an age gap, and even longer distances. Thomson is 59, Blair 42. Thomson met Blair when the latter was a 19-year-old wunderkind at Oxford. Thomson, who was on study leave from Timbertop, before he took over as headmaster, was dazzled by the intelligence of Blair and his friend Geoff Gallop, a Rhodes scholar and now deputy leader of the ALP in Western Australia.

Blair, for his part, said Thomson had a "spellbinding" impact on

him. "Lots of people are bright and intelligent and all this, but closed," said Thomson. "He (Blair) was open to all sorts of new ideas." Thomson said Blair and Gallop were among a group of young Oxonians whom he became close to in his two-year stint. Others included London lawyer Mark Palley and David Gardiner, now foreign editor on London's 'Financial Times'.

The group have remained in touch ever since. In his second visit in 12 months, Blair and his family spent 10 days at Thomson's property over Christmas, free from caucus meetings, security measures and London tabloids. They hiked up Mount Timbertop, played tennis and drank in the Merrijig pub. "Tony's very keen on physical exercise, so we did lots of walking, climbing and playing touch rugby," said Gallop, who, like Mark Palley, took his family to the reunion.

If the polls are to be believed, Tony Blair is a virtual shoo-in to be the next prime minister. While Peter Thomson is not a guru to Tony Blair and would be embarrassed to be described even as a mentor, he has had a hand in shaping the Labour leader's broad philosophy, which promises to be a sharp departure from the free-market, individualism-based philosophy of Margaret Thatcher.

In lengthy discussions with Thomson at Oxford (1972-74), Blair was, in hippy parlance, turned on to the Scottish philosopher and theologian John Macmurray, whose

portrait hangs prominently over the fireplace at Thomson's guest house in Merrijig. Thomson had adopted Macmurray's brand of Christian socialism by the time he met Blair. "It was all about the social dimensions of Christianity. It blew my mind," Thomson said, making his discovery of Macmurray sound like a narcotic experience.

MACMURRAY'S legacy to Thomson — and later Blair — was a belief in the importance of community, a belief that helped shape Thomson's approach to running Timbertop. "The error of Marx is that everyone became a cog in the machine," said Thomson. "The error of individualism is this crazy, fundamentalist, political notion that somehow individuals are created from nothing. It's just not the case. Individuality comes from the nurturing that occurs within the group."

As an old boy, I can vouch for the fact that Thomson's Timbertop was different from other schools, and quite distinct even from Geelong Grammar's Corio campus. It was a campus which, to Thomson's everlasting disappointment, other schools have not emulated. "You would have had a whole generation of people who felt differently about society," he said wistfully, "who would have experienced first-hand at 14, 15 years of age what it required to exist together."

Under Thomson, there was an emphasis on developing character — not just academic performance.

Although there was a harsh touch of 'Lord of the Flies' in the isolated set-up, we were all flung together, removed from families and civilisation and had little choice but to get along. It was Darwinian, but we learnt that co-operation made the experience more pleasant.

"I'm not putting myself in the same category as Manning Clark. All good liberal educational schools have that capacity to include people."

Community is the word which Thomson keeps coming back to, it dominates his discussions of what kind of prime minister Tony Blair might make and Thomson's recent stint as president of the Mansfield Football Club. Football clubs bring a community together, says Thomson, whose sons Christian and Quentin play for the team. Like Tony Blair, Thomson mixes a spiritual idealism with hard-headed pragmatism — a quality mandatory for any headmaster.

Tony Blair, in Thomson's estimation, will not only represent a marked departure from Thatcherism and Majorism, but from politics as usual. "I agree with Thatcher

that he's the most important politician to come on the scene for a long time ... He's for real, he's just not like your normal politician. I think there is a spiritual dimension."

Thomson's pragmatism was evident in the advice he gave Blair over attending Rupert Murdoch's News Limited conference at Hayman Island last year. Murdoch has long been a demon figure to British Labour, but Thomson encouraged Blair to go and put his case forward.

He told Blair "that it was something he should be happy to do because Murdoch happens to be an important person in this area of communications and certainly not someone to be afraid of ... to tell him what you think". Blair did just that.

Thomson is intensely interested in politics — he talks in glowing terms of Paul Keating's political skills, and of the influence of the Australian Labor Party's electoral success on Blair's attempt to steer a middle course. He can even find some praise through gritted teeth for Jeff Kennett's ability to make things happen. But he has never contemplated getting involved in the game, beyond talking to friends about it. "I'm a priest. I've never wanted to be anything else."

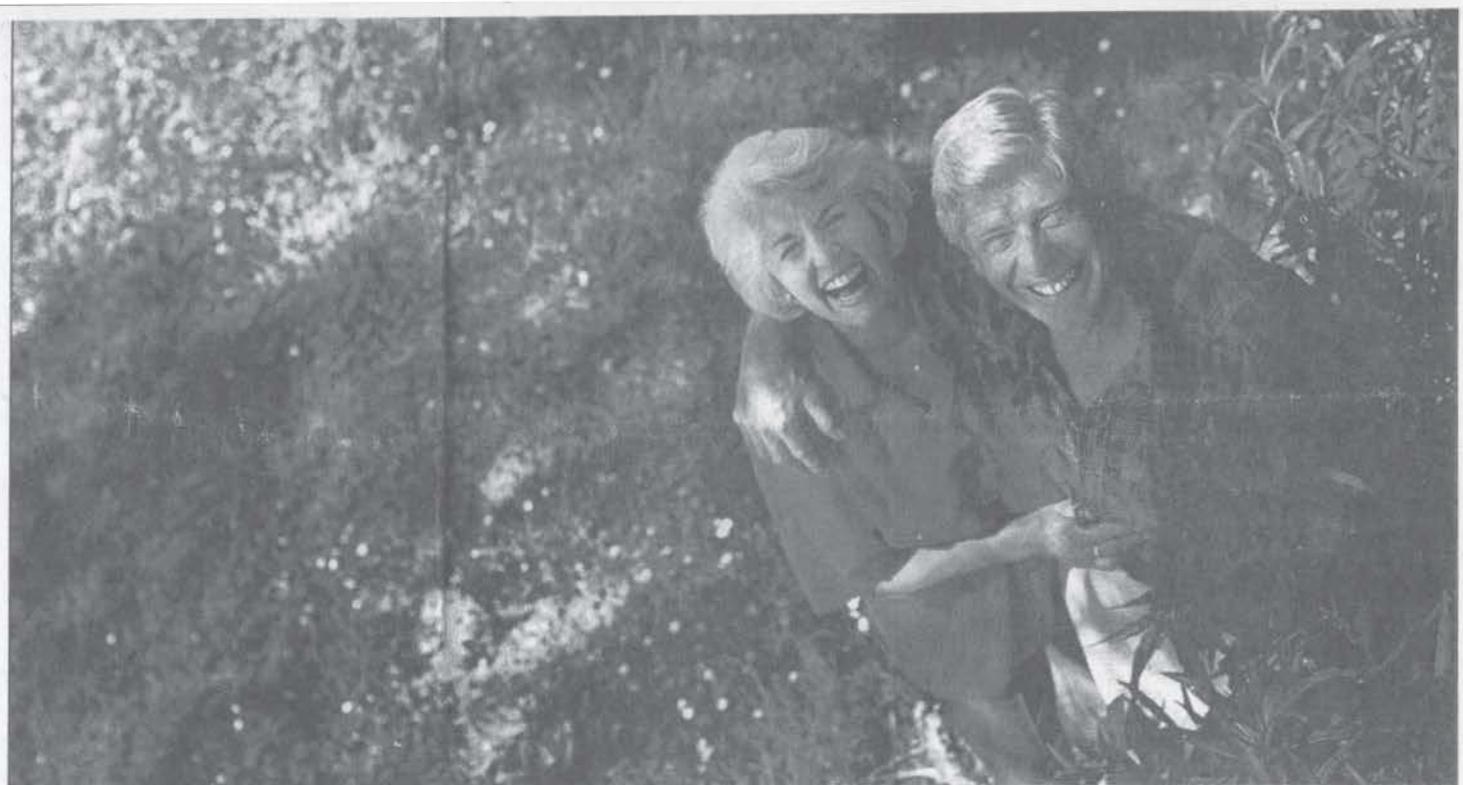
That he might have located if not inspired Tony Blair's "spiritual dimension" and converted him to Christian socialism will come as little surprise to the hundreds of students he guided at Timbertop. I would estimate that about a third of my year were confirmed by

Thomson, their conversion the result of a powerful cocktail of nature, community spirit and stirring oratory in church. "I can honestly say I didn't actively proselytise. It was just part of what we all did."

In explaining how the Blair connection was forged, Jeff Gallop stresses that one of Thomson's most important qualities was — and remains — his ability to talk to anyone. "Peter, of course, is not at all interested in class, it's something to be overcome rather than accepted. That's something that interested us all."

It is intriguing that Geelong Grammar, with its elitist profile, chose to entrust the care of so many students to a somewhat left of centre priest committed to an egalitarian vision of society. Should we be surprised? "It did surprise me," he said. "I suppose it surprised me as much as Manning Clark being on the staff at Geelong Grammar at one stage. I'm not putting myself in the same category as Manning Clark. All good liberal educational schools have that capacity to include people."

As we gaze from Thomson's veranda out at Mount Timbertop and Mount Buller, it occurs to me that this part of the world, oddly enough, is an experience shared by Tony Blair, prospective British prime minister, and Prince Charles, Timbertop old boy. "I'm sure that it would be a point of contact," Thomson said. "Maybe it could include Princess Di. She might love the space and beauty."



A man of many parts: Peter Thomson, pictured with his wife Helen, is intensely interested in politics but does not want to be a part of it. "I'm a priest," he says. **Picture: ROBERT BANKS**