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Gough changed us and saved ALP

TROY BRAMSTON THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 25, 2013 12:00AM

IN June 1949, Ben Chifley addressed the NSW Labor Party's annual conference at the Trades Hall in Sydney. In words that would ring for generations, Chifley described Labor's "great objective" as "the light on the hill".

Seated in the audience and listening to the words that would become etched into Labor's political soul was a young war veteran. He was living in the outer suburbs of Sydney and working as a barrister. His name was Edward Gough Whitlam.

Six months later, Chifley's government would be defeated by the Coalition parties led by Robert Menzies. Twenty-three years after that shattering defeat, and after many hard years in opposition, Whitlam led Labor out of the political wilderness.

A few years ago, Whitlam told me he met Chifley after he delivered the "light on the hill" speech. It is a story that seems to have eluded biographers and historians. But the parallels are irresistible.

Chifley was not the first prime minister he had met. In a flash of the legendary Whitlam wit, he said that in 1917, aged no more than one, he was introduced to John "Black Jack" McEwen during a visit to the family home. And he recalled seeing the spats-wearing Tory Stanley Melbourne Bruce on a school visit to Parliament House in 1928.

Whitlam, 97, can be found in his Sydney office a few days each week. He lives in a nursing home, has a loving family and attentive staff, and occasionally sees old colleagues. He no longer consents to interviews, delivers orations or offers comments on politics. But in a new book of essays Whitlam offers a "valedictory" message to the party he led in government and opposition for a record 11 years.

Whitlam instructs Labor to learn from its successes and failures, and develop new policies that have "contemporary relevance" for voters. By "constantly" reviewing its history, Labor can refresh its "sense of identity and purpose", he writes.

His key message is to "never forget the primacy of parliament as the great forum for developing, presenting and articulating policy". If Labor uses the parliament to better "develop, define and defend" its policies, it is less likely to be "blown off course" by the "accidents and aberrations" of political life.

Written during the final year of Julia Gillard's government, amid broken promises, poor judgment and spirited parliamentary clashes, Whitlam's message contains a powerful truth that cannot be ignored.

Like all PMs, he has earned the right to be heard by the party he led. Moreover, Whitlam's legacy, for Labor and for Australia, endures. Frankly, it's time to bust the myths that occasionally pollute commentary about Whitlam and his three-year government, from 1972 to 1975.

Whitlam was not the worst prime minister Australia ever had. That honour surely goes to the hapless Billy McMahon.

Nor did his government arrive in a burst of energy, only to see its hopes dashed and its record marked by underachievement.

In fact, the Whitlam legacy is substantial and lasting. It is a legacy that extends from the rebirth of

Labor in the late 1960s to almost every area of public policy and to the way politics is practised in the modern era.

When Whitlam took the helm of the Labor Party in 1967, it had suffered a string of election defeats. The party was unrepresentative and unimaginative.

His crusade to reform the party's structure and refresh its policies saved it from electoral oblivion.

Whitlam's emergence as a political leader in the 60s coincided with the dawn of modern politics: using television to its full potential, professional advertising, detailed market research and highly professionalised campaigning. These tools were instrumental in his success.

The policy legacy is extensive: universal healthcare, needs-based schools funding, and the reorientation of Australia's foreign policy, including recognising China, are now bipartisan articles of faith.

The legal reforms are also significant: lowering the voting age to 18; introducing territory senators; one-vote one-value electoral laws; abolition of the death penalty; no-fault divorce; legal aid; and abolishing the last vestiges of the White Australia policy. Others look to the complete withdrawal of forces from Vietnam, the abolition of conscription and the freeing of conscientious objectors. Or the introduction of a new honours system, a new national anthem, the encouragement given to the arts or sewerage the suburbs.

Abolishing tariffs and subsidies and reforming trade-practices law were important economic reforms that helped to make the economy more competitive.

But the inability to curtail spending and limit the growth of the public sector was a grave error. There were other policy failures, administrative deficiencies and ministerial scandals. These cannot be ignored. Equally, they should not be allowed to obscure the achievements.

And Whitlam deserves to be remembered for more than being dismissed in a coup conceived in secret and executed by ambush, as the documentary evidence now confirms. Whitlam is Australia's longest-lived PM. He was a trailblazer. He had courage and imagination. Few prime ministers have had a bigger personal impact. In many ways, he was the government.

It is often argued there was another way; that his "crash through or crash" style cost Labor power. But given the forces hostile to his reform agenda, there really was no other way.

Without Whitlam, it is doubtful whether Labor would have survived as a viable political force or that Australia would have been so profoundly remade. In the final analysis, the legacy endures because Whitlam understood what politics is fundamentally about: leadership.

Troy Bramston's *The Whitlam Legacy* will be launched tomorrow by Bill Shorten.