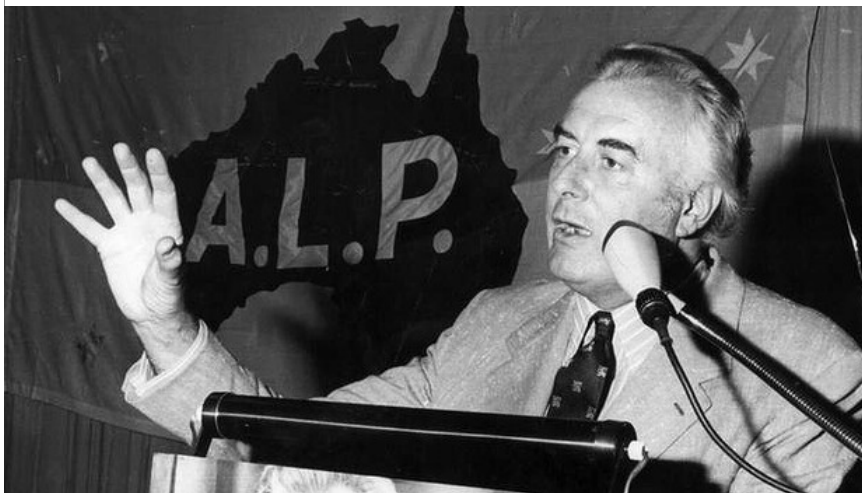


Labor must heed Whitlam and not waste this chance to reform

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EDITORIAL



Gough Whitlam knew that to change Australia he must first change the Labor party. Can the Labor party of 2013 do the same? *Photo: Chris Fowler*

Kevin Rudd has left the House for the last time. He leaves his party struggling to define its beliefs, let alone whether they meet the needs or aspirations of modern Australians. Labor's meltdown during six years of Rudd-Gillard-Rudd was revealed in gripping detail last week by the Herald's political editor, Peter Hartcher.

There are salutary lessons about what to avoid should Labor return to power. But before the party can consider such lofty ambitions, some equally telling advice has emerged about how to use its time in opposition wisely.

At 97, Gough Whitlam has written what is likely to be his valedictory speech to a party he dragged out of a post-World War II funk into what was a new Australia. For two decades, from backbencher to deputy leader to opposition leader, Whitlam was a conviction politician driven to use the Labor Party to reform the nation from government. But to do that, he first had to change Labor.

The party of 2013 faces a similar challenge to become re-electable. The latest Nielsen opinion poll in the *Herald* on Monday suggests it has made a good start, leading the Coalition 52 to 48 on the two party-preferred vote based on respondent preferences. The poll was taken at the end of a torrid first two parliamentary sitting weeks for the Abbott government.

While it is a relief for Labor, sustained good polling will mask the real need for change in policy and party structure. The new Labor leadership team of Bill Shorten and Tanya Pliibersek must learn from the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd errors and follow Whitlam's advice.

In his foreword to *The Whitlam Legacy*, the former leader outlines the importance of developing policy through the Parliament and the party - even more so now with the 24/7 news cycle. Strong policies have a better chance for Labor to "avoid getting blown off course by aberrations and accidents of modern politics".

Whitlam writes that Labor must understand the needs and aspirations of the electorate and explain thoroughly what the party stands for, while revising and reviewing its history.

As Hartcher's account shows, Labor in government was too focused on itself to succeed in meeting any of those criteria.

Even more so, in the light of Whitlam's advice, Labor may have been underprepared for government. Rudd and Gillard had each been in the House barely eight years when the excitement and symbolism of Kevin 07 swept Labor back to office after 11 Howard years. But that victory was always more about ending something - Work Choices - than having a policy platform to pursue.

By contrast, Whitlam had been instrumental for decades in shifting Labor away from its 1950s white Australia, communist and union base, as he forced change in key policies such as state aid for religious schools. By the time he took office he had so many policies developed through parliamentary committees and party battles that he created a duumvirate government of himself and deputy Lance Barnard to get things done. While crash or crash through typified Whitlam's three years in power, they gave Australia policies on health, education, divorce, Asia, social security and discrimination that remain central to national life.

By contrast, Hartcher's series shows how Rudd Mark I in government needed myriad inquiries to determine which policies to pursue - and even then, he dithered about which ones were right, did not consult and abandoned many such as emissions trading when the breeze of modern politics blew.

Hartcher reveals the burden of policy and political problems that Rudd left behind when the faceless men replaced him with Gillard. Under Gillard, too, policy reversals on emissions trading, the citizens' assembly for ideas and the outsourcing to companies of the detail of the mining tax undermined the electorate view of what Labor stood for. This was exacerbated by unnecessary alliances with the Greens and backflips on promises. Gillard struck power-hungry deals with the unions, erecting further barriers to reforming and democratising Labor. Under Rudd Mark II, there were more policy brain explosions and government by media release. It was as though Rudd-Gillard-Rudd Labor did everything Whitlam would not have.

Labor must reconnect with Australians. That will require a modern and democratic party structure, and a long period of policy development. There is much work to be done.

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