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Gough Whitlam 'a stroke of luck' for the lucky country

JAMES JEFFREY THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 27, 2013 12:00AM



Bill Shorten with Nick Whitlam at the launch yesterday of The Whitlam Legacy, a collection of essays edited by Troy Bramston.
Picture: Sam Mooy Source: TheAustralian

GOUGH Whitlam looms so large in Bill Shorten's mind that he even outstrips Ben Chifley's famous illumination.

"He seems not just the light on the hill, but the hill itself to which our eyes are ever turned," the Opposition Leader said yesterday at the launch of The Whitlam Legacy, a collection of essays edited by The Australian's Troy Bramston.

Mr Shorten said without Mr Whitlam's reforming leadership, the Australian Labor Party would have shrivelled and perhaps vanished.

"He was the necessary navigator that steered us to our future and back into the business of making history," he said.

"What if the Whitlam government had never occurred?" he said.

"Where would we be as a nation? Without a national health service; without pre-school for all children; without universal access to a tertiary education; without a film industry; without a pride in ourselves that has made us a leader worldwide in the arts and in science; without an independent, Asia-first foreign policy that recognised China. . . . He was the luck that Australia had for too short a time."

Among the crowd at NSW Parliament House were Mr Whitlam's son Nick, Whitlam ministers Doug McClelland and Kep Enderby, and speechwriter Graham Freudenberg.

While The Whitlam Legacy focuses on that government's life rather than its abrupt end, there was no

escaping the D-word.

"Included in the book are documents and essays, published for the first time, that confirm beyond any doubt that the dismissal was, as Gough Whitlam always said it was, a coup conceived in secret and executed by ambush," Bramston said, but the factors that paved the road to that fateful day shouldn't dominate the record.

"The failure to curb spending was a grave error of judgment, and we must acknowledge the scandals, the administrative chaos," Bramston said.

"But these things must not be allowed to obscure what are landmark achievements."