

# 'Inspiration was the thing'

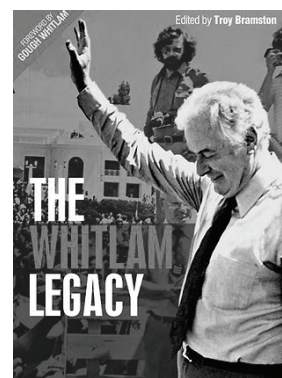
*Days of visionary verve in the ALP*

Ross McMullin

THE WHITLAM LEGACY

edited by Troy Bramston

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Having edited multi-authored retrospectives of *The Wran Era* (2006) and *The Hawke Government* (2003) together with *For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches* (2013), Troy Bramston has now turned his attention to *The Whitlam Legacy*. It is a comprehensive survey, not confined to assessments of how much the government's initiatives remain influential (which might seem the main focus from the title). Such assessments are included, but there is so much else: reminiscences, policy appraisals, key documents, perspectives on the Dismissal, and a contribution by Gough Whitlam.

Bramston has followed Whitlam's foreword with a preface, an introduction and a prologue (a quadrella not often encountered). The prologue outlines Whitlam's ascent to the prime ministership in 1972. Bramston has also analysed 'The Whitlam Government Through the Cabinet Papers', co-written a chapter on the Dismissal with Paul Kelly, provided an epilogue on 'Whitlam's True Believers', and assembled well-credentialed contributors to write thirty-six other chapters.

A section called 'The Whitlam Years and Political Style' has Michael Kirby confirming the significant influence of Whitlam's father (a senior public servant), Frank Bongiorno analysing Whitlam and 'The Program', and Bob Carr vividly underlining in 'I Was a Teenage Whitlamite' how frustrating it was to young activists like him that not everyone in the ALP saw Whitlam as the obvious solution to Labor's 1960s woes. Ministers' memoirs from Kep Enderby, Moss Cass, and Bill Morrison are complemented by an insightful 'View from the Back Bench' by Ralph

Willis. Evan Williams describes the prime minister's office, Rodney Tiffin examines 'Scandals', and Carol Johnson covers 'Whitlam and Labor Tradition'.

Thirteen chapters on specific policy areas include John Deeble on health, John Kerin on primary industry, Brian Howe on social policy, Frank Brennan on Aboriginal affairs, Gordon Bilney on foreign policy and defence, and Michael Easson on industrial relations. Easson highlights an important ingredient in his first paragraph: 'the inspiration was the thing. The Whitlam Government motivated Labor people like no federal government before or since.'

Bramston has evidently encouraged his contributors to weave reminiscences of their own involvement into their accounts and assessments of the Whitlam government's achievements and legacies. This blend is particularly well handled in Susan Ryan's chapter on women. In just nine pages, she outlines the limited horizons for so many women in the 1960s; illuminates Whitlam's resolve to transform this state of affairs despite the daunting hostility and political difficulties that resulted; emphasises that this enabled further advances when she had ministerial responsibility for women in the Hawke government, as well as transforming the gender gap that had handicapped Labor at elections; and points out that having women as prime minister, premier, governor-general, and three High Court judges in 2013 – each inconceivable before 1972 – 'constitutes nothing short of a revolution'. Much of the credit belongs to Whitlam, Ryan concludes, for his 'fearless, creative and entirely genuine pursuit ... of a fair go for Australian women'.

Another contributor who combines

memoir and analysis effectively is Leigh Hatcher. Having described the 'unrelenting sense of chaos and crisis' he encountered when he joined the Canberra press gallery as a nineteen-year-old journalist three months before the Dismissal, he goes on to lament the damage to our political system inflicted by changes in the media's coverage of it since then, with the voracious '24-hour news cyclone' a disturbing concern.

Bearing in mind the difficulties that the Rudd–Gillard governments experienced in policy creation, distillation, and advocacy, Whitlam's 'valedictory' recommendation is that Labor MPs should 'never forget the primacy of Parliament as the great forum for developing, presenting and explaining policy'. This is the best response to the 'unprecedented demands' now posed by the 'relentless news cycle'. Graham Freudenberg's chapter echoes Whitlam's advice.

Not surprisingly, there is considerable analysis of the Dismissal. Was it premature, in that some Liberal senators were about to cross the floor and allow supply through? Bramston's contributors disagree: this is a 'now-accepted fact', Enderby asserts, but to Gerard Henderson it's 'nothing but a myth'. (Peter van Onselen's unconvincing 'Sir John Did His Duty' doesn't refer to this possibility.)

In my centenary history of the Labor Party, *The Light on the Hill* (1991), I included Whitlam's perception that the essence of Kerr's ambush was that the governor-general liked his job and wanted to keep it. This compelling conclusion is reinforced by what Bramston and Kelly found in Kerr's journal, which 'reveals Kerr was obsessed about being ... removed from office' in 1975: 'fear of removal was always at the top of his mind.'

Bramston and Kelly gained access to Kerr's oral history interview for the National Library (completed in 1976, but restricted until 2041 unless permission is granted by Kerr's literary executor). It confirms Kerr's conceit as well as his obnoxious, obsequious relationship with Garfield Barwick.

In fact, it is surprising that more use has not been made in *The Whitlam Legacy* of other oral history interviews in the National Library that were conducted with key 1972–75 players during the 1980s. Also, in pursuing Barwick's role, Bramston and Kelly have scrutinised Barwick's papers in the National Archives, and report that 'four pages from Barwick's secret file on the dismissal have not been released by the archives', whereas the tally is sixty-one pages and access to them has evidently been blocked by Barwick's heirs or executors.

*The Whitlam Legacy* is dominated, inevitably, by the towering but flawed prime minister. To Paul Kelly, 'Whitlam was a leader who dared Labor to be great.' To Bramston, he was 'an authentic trailblazer' and 'unlike any other Prime Minister'; he understood that 'politics is fundamentally about ... leadership'. To Bob Carr, Whitlam deserves 'to be considered the most transformational leader in the party's history'. Ralph Willis, as a parliamentary novice in 1973, was amazed by the 'extraordinary dominance of Whitlam in parliament'. Journalist Geoff Kitney concurred that 'Whitlam's parliamentary debating and tactical skills were, of course, legendary'.

Whitlam's 'achievements are exceptional', declares Barry Jones, 'because he had no power base other than his head, his family and his faithful staff'; there was 'no faction, no coterie of intimates inside caucus'. Jones describes Whitlam as the longest-lived Australian prime minister and the longest-lived head of government in the Western world, and remarks that this 'longevity could not be attributed to exercise'. When Jim Cairns died, Whitlam stated that there were 'never any arguments between Jim and me'; this was 'certainly true', Jones observes, as 'they rarely spoke'.

*The Whitlam Legacy* appraises the government's manifest failures as well as

its successes. It is an illuminating retrospective for those unfamiliar with this unique era, and for those who are familiar there are intriguing little-known vignettes – MPs having a punch-up near King's Hall, Gerard Henderson doubting Billy McMahon's sanity, Arthur Calwell providing information to McMahon to undermine Whitlam's leadership, Rupert Murdoch and Malcolm Fraser sharing the same nanny as youngsters, Paul Keating insisting that Kerr should have been arrested, and remarkable revelations of the extent of the public service chiefs' resistance to Labor policies.

Paul Kelly concludes that 'Whitlam's historical presence constitutes a perpetual reminder of what Labor has lost in its diminished political soul'. Men and women of Australia, it's time for the ALP to regain visionary verve. What Labor looked like with it is very evident in this informative book.

**Ross McMullin's** most recent book, *Farewell Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation* (2012), was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History and the National Cultural Award.

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## Ode to the Metro

There's a still point in the afternoon  
when the cross-eyed dogs  
in the smudged pet-shop window  
are a distraction:

no poems, in this stuck point  
of the afternoon, I just watch  
cross-breeds with shredded paper  
stuck to their paws. It's not that bad.  
Amongst the mutterers in tracksuits

and the teenagers in musk-stick shorts,  
the drivers of retirement village buses  
who smoke and pick their fingernails  
against the wall;  
it's the hour of the disinterested and lonely,  
and the poets too, I guess (it's not  
that bad)

the bodies overspilling the bulk-billing  
neon doctor & nervous men  
in polo shirts  
pulling honey chicken off the bones.

Past the bakery  
where all the bread is cheesed and lurid, and the florist  
where the prices droop,  
the busker missing a guitar string  
and a tooth and the masseuse  
who's asleep at her own station.  
I'll take a sample shot  
of lukewarm wheatgrass – it's not that bad –  
and run my fingers on the pelts of peaches,  
become certain of their gravity, the point  
where they might overspill  
and scatter.

**Fiona Wright**