



Gough Whitlam pictured in 1995

RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE

PARTS OF HIS AGENDA SURVIVED THE TEST OF TIME

Bramston celebrates Hayden "as the one minister who most clearly understood the economic and budgetary challenges and advocated the most sensible policies in response".

This is all very fine, but it ignores the fact that the turn from a strong social democratic welfare state program spelled the end of market interventionist theories and the wave of regulatory reform that Bramston trumpets as the legacy of Whitlam.

The capitulation of the Whitlam government to the credo of keeping state intervention in the market to a minimum reaped no lasting benefit. Its polling figures were dire and damaging scandals added to its woes.

The scandals were a long suicide note. Predictably, ministerial sexual misdemeanours were a feature. But the cardinal one described in agonising detail by Rodney Tiffen was the attempt to gain loans from oil-rich Arab countries to fund the development of Australia's mineral wealth. A nation-building ideal turned into a nightmare as a carpetbagger employed to broker loans unleashed mayhem. The whole episode became, in Tiffen's words, "a policy folly on a grand scale". It claimed a ministerial scalp for misleading parliament, and gave Malcolm Fraser a skerrick of credibility in his crusade to block supply and force Whitlam's demise.

A whole section of the book is dedicated to the dismissal of the Whitlam government. This is unsurprising for, as Michael Sexton notes in his essay, the events of November 11, 1975, "have certainly cast a very long shadow". Sexton was an adviser to Kep Enderby, the attorney-general, and he was on duty the day Whitlam was felled. He provides a compelling insider's account of the key events. He's far more critical of Fraser's thrust for power and his unwillingness to wait 12 months for a deeply unpopular government to fall at an election than he is of governor-general John Kerr's "refusal to inform Whitlam in advance of what he was proposing to do".

History works in mysterious ways and Sexton notes that despite the fact the Whitlam government "would almost certainly have been very heavily defeated at the end of its normal term" the circumstances of its overthrow meant "Whitlam took on the role of martyr and hero within the Labor movement, achieving a status that later prime ministers like Hawke and Keating could never quite attain".

Paul Kelly is not so sanguine about Whitlam's heroic status. Kelly, one of Australia's finest journalists, has spent a lifetime tracking Whitlam. He has the final contribution in the section on Whitlam's legacy. He canvasses the highs and lows of the Whitlam epoch and is generous in his praise of the social policies that have endured. But he is adamant Whitlam was both hero and villain, and that he bequeathed a "hybrid legacy". Kelly's reductionism, evident in his claims Whitlam's reforms failed to take account of the conservative nature of Australians, undercuts his critique.

Kelly is ambivalent about Whitlam's heritage, but he bemoans the bleak contemporary Labor landscape that lacks someone of his stature. He states, "Whitlam was a leader who dared Labor to be great." Going against the grain of those who want to put messiahs behind them, Kelly understands the public yearning for charismatic leadership and a noble vision. In a book of stimulating essays on a topic that will reverberate down the years, Kelly finishes on a prophetic note. He states: "Whitlam's historical presence constitutes a perpetual reminder of what Labor has lost in its diminished political soul."

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The making of a Labor martyr

Frank Carrigan

The Whitlam Legacy
Edited by Troy Bramston
The Federation Press, 518pp, \$59.95 (HB)

PAUL Keating has noted almost every modern parliamentary political leader fails to leave office at a moment of their choosing. They get carted off prematurely on their shield. This occurs either through electoral defeat or an internal party coup.

Keating's realpolitik on the brevity of political leadership is refreshing. But his axiom needs to be viewed in parallel with the concept that even heroic failure can leave a legacy of unfulfilled promise that will inspire future generations. Tragic figures defeated by historical forces can be elevated into the pantheon of great leaders by the long eye of history.

For history to view defeated leaders with a warm gaze, there must be tribunes to sing their praise through time. Certainly, if Troy Bramston has anything to do with it, Gough Whitlam's name will echo down the centuries. Almost 40 years after Whitlam's toppling as Australia's prime minister, Bramston has put together a collection of essays that seeks to shine a light on Whitlam's legacy.

The contributors span a substantial slice of the political spectrum, but at each stage of this important and valedictory book, Bramston's hand is evident. As editor he was responsible for its structure and he has penned a number of the more illuminating essays.

Bramston is an articulate champion of the policies of modern social democracy that Whitlam epitomised in the 1960s and 70s. Yet he and the pick of the other contributors are at their best when narrating the force of circumstances that brought the Whitlam government to its knees.

The early structure of the book explores the influences that shaped Whitlam's social democratic vision. Michael Kirby pays tribute to Whitlam's father. He was a barrister and long-serving crown solicitor of the commonwealth.

Fred Whitlam, a social welfarist liberal, was "driven by key values of equality, tolerance and self-determination". Whitlam jr not only followed in the legal footsteps of his father but inherited his political philosophy.

Gough Whitlam's philosophical framework underpinned the rewriting of Labor's federal policy platform in the 1960s. He was responsible for a reformist program that was aimed at securing not only the vote of the working class, but also an expanded professional middle class that desired a larger share of the fruits of the long postwar boom.

Historian Frank Bongiorno maps the policy revamp of the 60s. It proved to be the springboard for Whitlam's 1972 victory. Bongiorno highlights that it was the contemporary debates in social democratic circles in Britain that shaped Whitlam's reformist vision. Whitlam seized hold of the Keynesian concept of a mixed economy that eschewed any nationalisation aspect and instead focused on "promoting economic growth and greater equality through public finance, progressive taxation and government expenditure".

Once in office, Whitlam and his coterie forged a program based on government creating the social goods the market was incapable of delivering. Key achievements were a needs-based schools policy and a national health system that Britain had pioneered in the 40s. He also promoted the development of a burgeoning resource sector, and programs to overcome race and sex inequality. The economy had been the beneficiary of an international boom but the new government realised a planned approach to tariffs was imperative if a robust competitive market was to flourish.

If Whitlam's legacy is to be considered enduring, it rests on the fact that parts of the agenda his regime introduced have survived the test of time. On this score, Whitlam can be proud of the fact that key aspects of a social democratic program that had been long in gestation and culled from experiments in other parliamentary states have drawn bipartisan support through the decades.

Politics gives an object lesson in cruelty when charismatic leaders driven by noble

dreams of creating a more egalitarian social structure are confronted by the changing tides of history. What invariably happens is that reformist visionaries confronted with a change in the economic and social pattern succumb to protecting the status quo and implement policies that are inimical to everything they believe in.

No sooner did Whitlam achieve power than the international economy began to experience the first pangs of recession. Bramston is the first cab off the rank in the second part of the book that plots the Whitlam government's management of the economy and government. He is a sympathetic narrator but unflinching in depicting the chaos that enmeshed the government as the economic crisis unfolded.

Bramston has nothing to say about the deeper causes of the puncturing of the postwar boom. But he has plenty to say on the personal and political toll that the economic slump inflicted. As the pressures grew, Whitlam's vanity began to irk his colleagues. One minister bemoaned his autocratic nature and that cabinet was no longer "a venue for discussion and policymaking". As collegiality fractured under the impact of an economic downturn, any space that was found to develop progressive legislation was a small miracle.

By mid-1973, the treasurer, Frank Crean, supported by other ministers, was urging deep cuts in spending to combat inflation. Prominent ministers such as the former economics lecturer Jim Cairns remained wedded to orthodox Keynesianism and promulgated the need to boost spending and push on with "the implementation of the government's social and economic policies".

In 1974, the slump deepened as unemployment and inflation surged, and conservative circles pushed for cutting spending and the state's withdrawal from many areas of providing social goods. Whitlam vacillated, but for a time courageously supported the continuation of an economic strategy based on expanding state expenditures to fund social reform.

However, by the time Bill Hayden became treasurer in June 1975, austerity measures had the backing of Whitlam and the cabinet.