

FOREWORD BY  
**GOUGH WHITLAM**

Edited by **Troy Bramston**

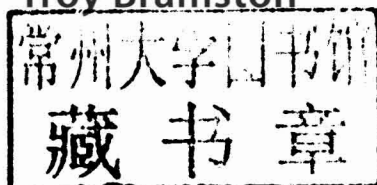
# THE WHITLAM LEGACY

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Edited by

**Troy Bramston**



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*Cover image:* Gough Whitlam addresses a crowd outside Parliament House on the day after his government was dismissed, on 12 November 1975.  
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# The Whitlam Legacy

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'I do not believe for a moment that we should set limits  
on what we can achieve, together, for our  
country, our people, our future.'

Gough Whitlam  
Election Policy Speech, Blacktown, 13 November 1972

## FOREWORD

### Gough Whitlam

I am most grateful to Troy Bramston and the distinguished contributors to *The Whitlam Legacy*. Throughout my public life I tried to apply an over-arching principle and a unifying theme to all my work. It can be stated in two words: contemporary relevance. This book meets the standard of contemporary relevance splendidly. We can best keep our history relevant by constantly reviewing and revising it. This is especially important for the Australian Labor Party. Our long history is our greatest renewable resource, from which we draw our sense of identity and purpose.

The pressures on our leaders today are much more intense than in my times, exciting and exacting as they were. I believe, however, that members and supporters at all levels can draw instruction from the record in these pages. We can still learn from our mistakes and failures as well as our successes and achievements.

May I make one valedictory point: never forget the primacy of Parliament as the great forum for developing, presenting and explaining policy. This seems to me the best response we can make to the unprecedented demands now made on our leaders and representatives by the relentless news cycle, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If we develop, define and defend our policies thoroughly before their implementation, we will be much less likely to be blown off course by the accidents and aberrations inseparable from modern political life. And Parliament is by far the best place to achieve it.

The most successful initiatives of my Government were those which had been most thoroughly explained to the electorate, using the great forums of the Party and the Parliament. There are excellent examples of, and insights into, this approach in this book. I congratulate Troy Bramston and his colleagues on this contemporary and relevant assessment of our efforts of four decades ago.

Also by Troy Bramston:

*For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches that Shaped History*  
(The Federation Press, Sydney, 2012)

*Looking for the Light on the Hill: Modern Labor's Challenges*  
(Scribe, Melbourne, 2011)

*The Wran Era*  
(The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006)

*The Hawke Government: A Critical Retrospective* (with Susan Ryan)  
(Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2003)

To my grandparents,  
Jack Bramston, Peg Bramston, Herb Nicholson and Joan Nicholson,  
who lived through Labor governments led by  
Jim Scullin, John Curtin, Frank Forde and Ben Chifley  
and kept the faith during the next 23 years waiting for  
Edward Gough Whitlam



# PREFACE

On 2 August 2010, having recently discovered the full text of Gough Whitlam's famous speech to the Labor Party's Victorian Branch conference in 1967 – 'the impotent are pure' – I visited his office high above William Street in Sydney. Gough told me he would have resigned as party leader if his crusade to reform the party had failed. The speech was to be one of many Whitlam speeches included in a forthcoming collection, *For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches That Shaped History*, published in 2012. We discussed some of the other speeches in the book, including those by other Prime Ministers. I asked Gough who was the first Prime Minister he had met. I expected him to say Ben Chifley, who was the party's leader when he had joined the party in 1945. But it was actually 'Black' Jack McEwen, in 1917, as an infant. He did meet Chifley, however, at the Labor Party's NSW Branch conference in 1949, held at the Trades Hall in Sydney. Gough spoke to Chifley after he had delivered 'the light on the hill' speech. The first Prime Minister he saw in office was Stanley Melbourne Bruce, on a visit to Parliament House in 1928 as a Canberra school student.

Born in the month after the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, my interest in politics, public policy and history was sparked during the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. I was a primary school student when Hawke became Prime Minister. This interest was deepened when Keating became Prime Minister and I followed his government closely while at high school and university. I wrote an Honours thesis analysing Keating as a political leader. Later, I co-edited a book on the Hawke Government. They were the very model of a modern Labor government. They led a very different style of government to the one Whitlam had led from 1972 to 1975. During the 1980s and 1990s, modern Labor often looked back on the Whitlam years as a model for how not to govern. Hawke had seen the Whitlam Government up close as ACTU president and as ALP national president. Keating had been a backbencher and a minister. Around the Hawke Government's cabinet table, there was no room for an 'unreconstructed Whitlamite', as Susan Ryan often told me. 'I had witnessed the absolute chaos at the way the Whitlam government had operated', Hawke told me. 'I have a great admiration for so much of what Gough Whitlam did, but the actual running of the cabinet-caucus relationship was a disaster.'<sup>1</sup> For modern Labor, Whitlam was not to be emulated nor elevated to greatness, even though many Labor true believers often yearned for a Whitlam-style government of energy, inspiration and reform. I too looked back on the 'razzle, dazzle and crash' Whitlam years as out of place in the modern party refashioned by Hawke and Keating.

Yet the Whitlam legacy was impossible to ignore. The story of the dismissal encouraged my growing interest. To this day, the interplay of key protagonists, the battle for supremacy as the political system was pushed to the brink and the unprecedented conclusion remains so dramatic, so unbelievable and so extraordinary that a Hollywood scriptwriter would deem it too fanciful to recreate for the silver screen. John Kerr's death in 1991 prompted me to write a high school assignment on the dismissal. In 1994, before you could search second-hand bookshops on the internet, I wrote to the then editor of *The Australian*, Paul Kelly, asking for a copy of his 1976 book *The Unmaking of Gough*. Twenty years before, Kelly had reported on the dismissal. He sent me the book with a personal note typed beneath the letterhead of *The Australian*. The 20th anniversary of the dismissal was the catalyst for a rapid education in the Whitlam government. Newspapers covered it in detail. Kelly's *November 1975* was published. My eyes were glued to the television set as he recreated the events and analysed how and why it happened for the ABC's *Four Corners* program.

I have had the pleasure to meet and talk with Gough many times over the past 20 years. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he occasionally phoned me to discuss policy matters and contemporary politics, as I worked to revive the Fabian Society in NSW. I cherish several hand-written notes attached to speeches and articles that he thought I might find interesting. I saw him speak at countless Labor Party dinners, conferences and forums. I recall talking to him at the opening of an exhibition of Damien Parer's wartime photography at the NSW State Library, with my friend John Degen. Seated next to him at a dinner at the University of Sydney's ALP Club in 2000, he agreed that the Labor Party should abolish its redundant socialist objective. I visited his office in Sydney a few times. In April 2012, after Margaret Whitlam died and I had written several articles about her life,<sup>2</sup> he sent me a personal note of thanks, signed 'Gough'. In December 2012, after writing several articles to mark the 40th anniversary of the election of his government,<sup>3</sup> I visited him briefly in his office and he signed an original pamphlet of his 'It's Time' election policy speech.

A decade ago, I became friends with Graham Freudenberg, Whitlam's speechwriter, confidant and court historian. We have discussed the Whitlam years at length. I was commissioned by *Eureka Street* to attend the embargoed briefing of the release of the Whitlam Government's cabinet papers and to write about it for the journal. I did this for each of the full years of the Whitlam government's cabinet papers: 1973, 1974 and 1975.<sup>4</sup> I interviewed Malcolm Fraser about his life, including the dismissal, in 2002 and 2013.<sup>5</sup> I read all of the books, viewed every documentary, watched *The Dismissal* mini-series, scrolled through newspaper articles on microfilm and delved into the archives looking to further my understanding of a government that was gone before I was born.

While my interest in Whitlam and his government continued to grow, it was in compiling my two previous books, *For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches That Shaped History* and *Looking for the Light on the Hill: Modern Labor's Challenges*, that I realised the Whitlam legacy was more significant than I had realised. As I reviewed Whitlam's speeches and examined his push for internal Labor Party reform, I gained a new appreciation of his legacy. It is my hope that this book iterates the importance of Whitlam to the Labor Party and to Australia: from the creation of Medibank and the shift to a system of needs-based schools funding, to the diplomatic recognition of China and independence for Papua New Guinea, to the suite of legal reforms such as abolishing the death penalty, no-fault divorce, anti-discrimination laws, removing the vestiges of White Australia from our immigration laws and lowering the voting age to 18 years.

I owe Gough an enormous debt of gratitude for his support while I compiled this book. That support came not only for the project as a whole, but in writing a 'valedictory' essay reflecting on the importance of Parliament and the party in developing and communicating policy. His office, managed by the loyal and supremely dedicated Aaron Rule, responded promptly to every request, answered every question and always made me feel very welcome when visiting.

I am grateful that so many distinguished Australians accepted my invitation to write a chapter for this book. To do so required a lot of time and effort and they received nothing but my appreciation. It is a special privilege to be able to work with so many respected individuals, from politics and the public service to academia and journalism. I owe a special thanks to Paul Kelly: his research, writing and analysis of the Whitlam years has set a standard above all others. To sit with Paul for several days in the National Archives in Canberra in late 2012 and review John Kerr's personal papers, discuss almost every aspect of the dismissal and co-write a series of articles for *The Australian* is a highlight of my career.

Historians, as Whitlam argued, who want to understand what happened and why, must use the documentary record. I drew on many archives as I worked on this book and was fortunate to receive much support and encouragement. The Whitlam Institute does a magnificent job in maintaining Whitlam's personal files and promoting his legacy. From the Institute, I thank Eric Sidoti, Liz Curach, Amy Sambrooke and Lorraine West for their assistance. The archival material located in the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria, the National Library of Australia and the National Archives of Australia was also of great benefit. The former General Secretary of the Australian Labor Party (NSW Branch), Sam Dastyari, provided a grant to reproduce some of the photographs in the book. The National Assistant Secretary of the Australian Labor Party, Nick Martin, gave me permission to reproduce several photographs from the party's archives. Christine Walker

from Malcolm Fraser's office helped to locate several items in Fraser's personal archive and secured permission for me to publish them.

No publication in this country has devoted more column inches to quality reporting and analysis of politics, policy and national affairs than *The Australian*. In writing my own columns, news, features and editorials, *The Australian* has given me an opportunity for which I will always be grateful. My appreciation goes to Chris Mitchell, Clive Mathieson, Michelle Gunn, Nick Cater, Steve Waterson, Jennifer Campbell, Rebecca Weisser, Chris Kenny and Peter van Onselen. Chris generously allowed me to include in the book several front pages of *The Australian* and photographs from the News Limited archives, which Milan Scepanovic, helped me to locate.

The Federation Press has published two of my previous books and I am delighted to extend the partnership to a third. Thank you to Chris Holt, Kathryn Fitzhenry, Di Young, Josephine Romeo, Rebecca Fung and Trisha Valliappan and the rest of the team.

I am fortunate to be able to share my research, ideas and opinions with friends and family. My parents, Jeff and Michele Bramston, have supported me in all of my endeavours. So has my sister, Simone. My close friends, Martin Breen, John Degen and Ben Heraghty, have always encouraged these books. Nicky Seaby has endured me writing and editing three books in three years, and always with love, encouragement and support. It is a better book because of her understanding of how important it is to me and because of her willingness to discuss and debate aspects of it. My two wonderful children, Madison and Angus, each with a book dedicated to them, would have liked another. But *The Whitlam Legacy* is for my grandparents who taught me so much. I miss them all the time and wish they were here to see it.

Troy Bramston  
Editor  
August 2013

# INTRODUCTION

*Troy Bramston*

At 1.45 pm on Tuesday, 5 December 1972, three days after Gough Whitlam had led Labor to government after 23 years in opposition, he spoke to outgoing Prime Minister Billy McMahon by telephone. McMahon kept a record of the conversation. It conveys the energy, drive and frenetic activity that would characterise the subsequent three years of Labor in power. 'You will know that I have party rules which I have to adhere to and they require the election of members of the ministry', Whitlam told McMahon. But Whitlam did not want to wait. He told McMahon he had already consulted Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck and arranged for himself and his deputy, Lance Barnard, to be sworn in that afternoon. Between the two of them they would administer every ministerial portfolio of the government. 'There were certain matters', Whitlam told McMahon, 'which must be done immediately to carry out electoral promises'.<sup>1</sup>

McMahon was stunned. He had first spoken to Hasluck about the transfer of power at 10.50 am on the Sunday after the election, according to notes kept by Hasluck.<sup>2</sup> McMahon had expected to carry on as interim Prime Minister until the full ministry could be elected by the Labor caucus and sworn-in. 'He proposed that he should call on me next Tuesday to hand in his resignation and to advise me to send for Mr Whitlam', Hasluck wrote. But McMahon anticipated that Whitlam would wait until Thursday to see Hasluck, in line with the timetable for the last transfer of power, from Ben Chifley to Robert Menzies in 1949. However, Hasluck would see Whitlam on Tuesday, straight after seeing McMahon, and commission him later that afternoon. Cabinet secretary Sir John Bunting told Hasluck on the Monday, 'Whitlam had it in mind to propose that he and his deputy leader should be sworn in at once as ministers for the entire range of Commonwealth Departments to form an interim government until such time as the swearing-in of a full ministry could take place'.<sup>3</sup> Whitlam had also consulted the secretary of the Attorney-General's Department, Sir Clarence Harders, who advised there were 'no legal or constitutional impediments' to the formation of a duumvirate government.<sup>4</sup>

McMahon arrived at Government House to tender his resignation as Prime Minister at 11.30 am on the Tuesday after the election. 'In the course

of the conversation he expressed a mixture of disappointment and of relief at the results of the election', Hasluck recorded. 'He [McMahon] was not chastened, or so it appeared, by the defeat which he thought was due to the faults of others and the wickedness of the Labor Party.' If McMahon had won the election, he told Hasluck, he would have retired 'in about two years' time'. He was not interested in helping to rebuild the Liberal Party and signalled his exit from politics at the next election. (In fact, he would not resign from Parliament until 4 January 1982.) Hasluck asked about possible successors as party leader. What did he make of Billy Snedden, Don Chipp, Malcolm Fraser, Phillip Lynch and Andrew Peacock? 'He said none of them was any good', Hasluck noted. 'He had a low opinion of all of them. They were just not good enough for leadership.' Following McMahon's meeting with Hasluck, the Governor-General saw Whitlam at 12.15 pm. 'I congratulated him on his victory at the polls', Hasluck wrote, '[and] told him that I had accepted Mr McMahon's resignation and asked him to form a government'. Whitlam advised that a two-man interim ministry be formed. Hasluck agreed. A swearing-in was scheduled for 3.30 pm that afternoon.

After seeing Hasluck, Whitlam informed McMahon on the telephone there would be no delay in forming a new government. Nor would there be a meeting of outgoing and incoming Prime Ministers. McMahon asked Whitlam if he had 'consulted the appropriate people'. Whitlam said he had spoken to senior public servants and to the electoral commissioner, who had informed him the counting of votes in all seats would not be completed for another 10 days. As a result, he could not convene a party meeting until 'about 20 December'. Whitlam assured McMahon he 'did not want to create the impression that he was rushing in to grab the spoils'. As the brief call ended, and learning his prime ministership would expire in less than two hours, McMahon noted: 'I wished him good luck and said that I hoped he was given a fair go'. For Whitlam, winning an election mandate was not viewed 'merely as a permit to preside, but as a command to perform'.<sup>5</sup> There was no time to waste; one of the most tumultuous periods in Australian politics was about to begin. Edward Gough Whitlam became the 21st Prime Minister of Australia just after 3.30 pm on Tuesday, 5 December 1972.

## The Whitlam Legacy

More than 40 years later, Whitlam's legacy casts a long shadow over the party he led, the nation he transformed and the political life of Australia that he recast. The legacy extends to three key areas. First, Whitlam turned what was a ramshackle, unrepresentative and unimaginative Labor Party into an electoral force that could win government. He oversaw major reforms to the party's organisational structure and renovated its policies. Second, Whitlam's political ascendancy marked the birth of modern politics: specialised

advertising, market research, the use of television to its full potential, targeted seats and professional candidate training and on-the-ground organising. And third, the policy legacy of the Whitlam government is significant and lasting. Many reforms that were fiercely opposed by the opposition parties and the conservative establishment have now become bipartisan articles of faith.

Universal health care was achieved with the creation of Medibank. Schools funding became needs-based, rather than ad hoc funding for grants and scholarships, ending decades of division over state aid. University and technical college fees were abolished. Environmental impact statements for major cabinet decisions were introduced. Thousands of homes were connected to the sewer. Funding was provided for major infrastructure and public transport projects. The arts were encouraged with new funding and new creative institutions. Women were given equal opportunities in federal government employment.

In foreign policy, the government adopted a more independent outlook that was less attached to Britain or the United States. The withdrawal of forces from Vietnam was completed and conscription was abolished. Conscientious objectors were freed from prison. Diplomatic recognition was given to China, building on Whitlam's landmark visit as opposition leader in 1971. The transition to independence and self-government in Papua New Guinea was completed. Reflecting Australia's new international outlook, appeals to the British Privy Council from State Supreme Courts were abolished, a new Australian honours system was introduced, The Queen's title was changed to 'Queen of Australia', and 'Advance Australia Fair' replaced 'God Save the Queen' as the national anthem.

While Whitlam pivoted foreign policy in a new direction that subsequent governments have followed, the alliance with the United States was threatened. A key flashpoint was Whitlam's criticism of United States bombing in North Vietnam in a letter he sent to President Richard Nixon in December 1972. Whitlam's mooted withdrawal from SEATO – a regional security alliance – raised doubt over the future of the ANZUS alliance<sup>6</sup> and future 'intelligence sharing'.<sup>7</sup> The Americans recognised a deterioration in the political and security relationship. But they also understood and appreciated the 'fundamental reorientation of both internal and external policies', according to a profile of the Whitlam government prepared by the State Department in 1974.<sup>8</sup>

A suite of law reforms were introduced: lowering the voting age to 18 years, two new Senators for each of the Territories, one-vote-one-value electoral laws, abolition of the death penalty, the establishment of legal aid, no-fault divorce, the formation of the Australian Law Reform Commission and the passage of the *Racial Discrimination Act*, which outlawed racial bigotry. The final vestiges of the White Australia policy – allowing for immigration

applications to be assessed on the basis of the colour of a person's skin – were removed.

There were important economic reforms such as the abolition of tariffs, subsidies and preferential tax treatment for certain industries. The government invested heavily in the productive drivers of the economy such as education, child care and infrastructure. The introduction of new trade practices laws tackled anti-competitive behaviour. Yet, as Whitlam himself argued, the economic failures were significant. It is worth noting the economy inherited by the government in 1972 was already experiencing a downturn and unemployment and inflation were at their highest point since the early 1960s. Growth was below the post-war average. There were a series of external shocks to the economy, including a 70 per cent increase in oil prices in late 1973. No government abroad handled these challenges well.

Although the government reduced spending in some areas, the overall size of the public sector dramatically increased and government spending ballooned. In mid-1974 Whitlam failed to convince cabinet to reduce spending and tighten monetary policy. In 1974-75, spending rose by an astonishing 46 per cent, contributing to a deficit of \$2.5 billion (around 4 per cent of GDP). Unemployment and inflation increased. The failure to work closely with the unions saw a series of wage breakouts. While not discounting these failures, the irony is that under new budgetary accounting measures adopted by the Howard government, which exclude net advances, Treasury records the Whitlam period as producing two budget surpluses and one modest budget deficit.

Whitlam was a conviction politician. He was in politics for a purpose. He was a change agent. His mission was to reform Australia. He pursued it relentlessly with imagination, intellect and courage. It underscored Whitlam's inimitable description of himself as a 'crash through or crash politician'.<sup>9</sup> This virtue, however, was also a vice. The drive to implement Labor's mandate, at almost any cost, led to a chaotic and, at times, shambolic government that paid little attention to the economy, the state of the budget, public service advice and protocols, or to public opinion. How Labor governed was a central factor in the events that led to its downfall, when Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed the government on 11 November 1975. Labor had governed for just 1072 days.

It is because of the government's enduring legacy that this book has been compiled. Inevitably, accounts of the Whitlam government have focused more on its destruction than what it delivered for Australia. Because of the disproportionate focus on the dismissal rather than the breadth of the government's achievements and a frank assessment of its failures, I felt it was time to examine the Whitlam era in a new book. In bringing together a range of unparalleled insider and outsider views – from ministers, staff and public servants to journalists, academics and commentators – my aim is to



provide the reader with a collection of new and insightful recollections and reassessments, four decades after the government took office in 1972.

## The Book

This is the third book in a series of retrospective essays that examine the personalities, the political events and the policies of past governments. The first is *The Hawke Government: A Critical Retrospective* (Pluto Press, 2003), which I co-edited with Susan Ryan. The second was my edited collection, *The Wran Era* (The Federation Press, 2006) which analysed Neville Wran's decade-long government in New South Wales from 1976 to 1986.

When assembling the cast of contributors, I asked for a retrospective essay on a particular topic, using a mix of new and established sources, perhaps with personal insights and a fair and balanced analysis. Yet again, I am delighted that so many high profile and distinguished individuals accepted this invitation. The book is aimed at a wide audience. Its purpose is not to eulogise or demonise, celebrate or denigrate the Whitlam government, but rather to acknowledge its successes and achievements alongside its flaws, mistakes and misjudgments.

This is not the first book of essays to explore the Whitlam government. But I believe the most comprehensive. This is not to discount the previous books that have also made an important contribution to our understanding of the period. There are four key previously published books: Henry Mayer (ed), *Labor to Power: Australia's 1972 Election* (Angus & Robertson, 1973); The Fabian Papers collection, *The Whitlam Phenomenon* (McPhee Gribble, 1986); Hugh Emy, Owen Hughes and Race Mathews (eds), *Whitlam Re-Visited: Policy Development, Policies and Outcomes* (Pluto Press, 1993); and Jenny Hocking and Colleen Lewis (eds), *It's Time Again* (Circa Books, 2003). A decade since the last collection of essays and four decades since the government came to office, the passage of time provides for a fuller and more balanced perspective to be drawn on events so long ago. Indeed, the release of the complete cabinet records of the period adds significantly to our understanding of the Whitlam years.

For those wanting to explore this rich period of history further, there are several biographies of Whitlam. The best is Laurie Oakes' *Whitlam PM* (Angus & Robertson, 1973). Oakes has also written a definitive account of the 1972 election with David Solomon, *The Making of an Australian Prime Minister* (Cheshire, 1973) and a study of the government's 'unmaking': *Crash Through or Crash: The Unmaking of a Prime Minister* (Drummond, 1976). Jenny Hocking has completed a two-volume biography, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (MUP, 2008) and *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (MUP, 2012). The standout book of Whitlam's life and his government is Graham Freudenberg's *A Certain Grandeur* (Macmillan, 1977; Penguin, 1987; Penguin, 2009). Several ministers