

A PM with his gaze firmly on the future

The overriding principle of Whitlam's life was contemporary relevance

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Gough Whitlam's death at age 98 on October 21, 2014 — a year ago this month — prompted an extraordinary outpouring of public emotion and a mostly generous recognition of his policy and political achievements. It was a warm tribute paid in death that often eluded him in life.

Retrospectives on Whitlam's life and legacy saturated news coverage for days. It was the end of a political era.

His memorial service at the Sydney Town Hall was a remarkable event. As current and former politicians, vice-regal representatives, judges, business, arts and community leaders arrived, they had to navigate the large crowd outside, snaking around city street corners.

A photo of seven prime ministers snapped in the Town Hall's vestibule is now etched into the nation's political memory.

While the event was infused with Labor tribalism, the service had a unifying effect. The speakers were diverse: Aboriginal elder Noel Pearson; then senator John Faulkner; Whitlam speechwriter Graham Freudenberg; actress Cate Blanchett; and Tony Whitlam, Gough's son. "It will be quite a show," Nick Whitlam, Gough's second son, told me. And so it was. There was a welcome to country, a didgeridoo solo and performances by a symphony orchestra and philharmonic choir.

The ranks of former Whitlam ministers are thinning. But present to pay their respects were Doug McClelland, Kep Enderby and Les Johnson. Paul Keating sat with the prime ministerial assemblage.

Bill Hayden could not be there. A week later, I visited Hayden in Brisbane. He was emotional. Hayden said too many people had "kicked Whitlam when he was down" after the 1975 election. He was pleased Whitlam was being fondly remembered. "It is a remarkable tribute to the man that the outpouring continued for so long," he said.

Now there are just seven ministers from the Whitlam years still with us. The living links with this landmark era are passing into history.

The final years of Whitlam's life were largely divided between Lulworth House, an assisted-care facility, and his office in the Sydney CBD. He occasionally saw family, friends and former parliamentary colleagues.

In the weeks after Whitlam's death, the personal items that he had around him were collected,

boxed and transferred to the Whitlam Institute. They offer a window into Whitlam's world in his final years.

At Lulworth House there were 32 volumes of Encyclopaedia Britannica; several editions of Who's Who in Australia and the Parliamentary Handbook (2008 and 2013); Oxford and Webster's dictionaries; an SBS World Guide; and a book about popes. There were reports, papers and files.

There was a suitcase with academic robes; gifts from Aboriginal elders; a memento from his Telopea Park school; and trinkets from a visit to China in 2003. Photos and artworks were scattered around: an Aboriginal dot painting; a Bill Leak sketch of him and Margaret Whitlam; cartoons of him and Harold Holt; a wartime photo of Whitlam on patrol in northern Australia; and a bronze relief artwork given by Papua New Guinea's Michael Somare.

In his Sydney office was another collection of documents, books, photos and gifts. There were copies of speeches he had de-

'Fate had conspired against me'

GOUGH WHITLAM

livered. A document outlining caucus voting in ministry elections was within reach. There were photos of Whitlam; his father-in-law, Justice Bill Dovey; and another recalling when Whitlam scooped up a handful of dirt and poured it into Vincent Lingiari's hand, symbolising the transfer of land into traditional ownership in 1975.

Gough's prime ministerial "in" tray sat on his desk alongside a plaque presented to Margaret by Madame Soeharto in 1973. Three tiny boxes contained Chinese seals and ink, with a version of the name "Whitlam". The Encyclopaedia Britannica on compact disk sat on the desk next to a recording of the band named after him, *Introducing The Whitlams*.

There were stamps from his Werriwa electorate office; a RAAF desk set with pen and letter opener, a gift from Kevin Rudd; and a baggage strap with the name "Whitlam" on it.

The Whitlam Legacy was launched by Bill Shorten on November 26, 2013, at Parliament House in Sydney. The event was hosted by Luke Foley. Nick Whitlam represented his father. Three days later, on November 29, I visited Gough in his office in Sydney. It was the last time I spoke to him.

"I'm aiming for 100," Gough said. He sat behind his desk, cluttered with papers and books. He was 97.

A copy of my speech given at the book launch was on his desk.

He had made a correction. To Gough, I said: "I will always be grateful." He corrected it to read: "I shall always be grateful."

Gough had been reading a large dictionary given to him and his sister, Freda, by their parents when they were children.

Alongside the dictionary was a large volume of Hansard. It was the anniversary of his election to parliament in 1952. It would be the last anniversary.

He asked if I would mind if he read aloud part of his maiden speech. How could I object? So there I sat, utterly transfixed as this great lion of a man, now in the winter of his life, read out one of his proudest speeches.

On the wall above Gough's desk was a photo taken in 2008 at Kirribilli House. Rudd had invited Gough, Keating and Bob Hawke to join him for dinner. Gough was seated with the other prime ministers standing around him. They each held a glass of celebratory champagne. He said of his successors that Keating, "who had been a minister in my government", was the one who had most faithfully carried on his legacy.

Gough spoke about religion, the changing nature of newspapers, the loyalty of Freudenberg, reflected on colleagues he admired and those he loathed, and expressed his astonishment that Barack Obama, a black man, was elected president of the US.

He mentioned that Quentin Bryce had visited recently. As they sat down for tea, Gough said: "I always get nervous when I'm meeting with a governor-general."

During other visits to his office, Gough talked about some of the personalities, policies and political events of his life.

Gough said he would have resigned as Labor leader if the party did not accept his demand that it reform its internal structures and overhaul its policies in the late 1960s. I remember a long conversation about his predecessor, Arthur Calwell, in 2007. "He was just so f..king hopeless," Gough said. If Calwell had vacated the leadership before the 1966 election, after two defeats, then Gough believed he would have won the 1969 election. "He just hung on for so long," Gough said.

Gough told me the story of how he joined the Labor Party in 1945. He went to the party's head office at the Sydney Trades Hall, still wearing his RAAF uniform, and filled out the forms.

He saw Ben Chifley deliver "the light on the hill" speech in the Trades Hall auditorium in 1949. He met Chifley after the speech. The first prime minister Gough saw in office was the spats-wearing Stanley Bruce on a school excursion to Parliament House in 1928. I found these stories captivating. For me, born after Whitlam was prime minister, he was history.

He was the first Labor leader born in the 20th century. He was born when the first prime minister, Edmund Barton, was still alive. He was the longest serving Labor leader, but one of the shortest serving prime ministers.

In 1960, at 43, he was the



Above, Paul Keating with Gough Whitlam in 1974; he said of his successors that Keating was the one who had carried on his legacy. And Whitlam with the author, below, in 2013



youngest deputy leader of the party since 1920. He defeated four others to become leader in 1967. He faced three leadership challenges and won each time. He led the party to five general elections and was the first to win back-to-back victories.

He was the longest lived prime minister. His marriage to Margaret was the longest prime ministerial marriage. He wrote and sold more books than any other prime minister.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he spoke on the phone from time to time. I have notes of some of these conversations.

When I was in high school, I lived in Cronulla. Gough had moved to Cronulla in 1947. The suburb was then part of the seat of Werriwa. So we talked about the Sutherland Shire. Gough remembered giving speeches at the Hotel Cecil in Cronulla. He said the Sutherland Shire was once a hive of Communist Party activity.

A few years ago, I took my son, Angus, to see where Whitlam lived in Cronulla. Gough failed to be elected to the local council and to state parliament. He could have become president of Sutherland Shire or premier of NSW. "Fate had conspired against me," he often said.

During these phone calls, he la-

mented Kim Beazley's leadership, was disappointed in Mark Latham, bemused by Simon Crean, admonished John Howard for ignoring the UN, advocated four-year parliamentary terms, argued for a republic and thought Labor had lost its Fabian-style commitment to policymaking.

He agreed Labor should abolish its socialist objective. He spoke about the need to reform the hospital system, invest in public transport and return to free university education. He lamented the decline of political oratory.

We talked about the 1975 dismissal, but I wish we had discussed it more. More than once he called it a "coup conceived in secret and executed by ambush".

Gough had contempt for governor-general John Kerr, who he saw as deceitful. He said Kerr was a drunk. He described Kerr's second wife, Anne Kerr, as "Fancy Nancy". She encouraged Kerr's worst excesses, Gough said. He apologised to the Queen for recommending she appoint Kerr as governor-general.

He regarded the formal advice by chief justice Garfield Barwick as "nonsense" as it meant any government that didn't control the Senate lacked "legitimacy".

Gough thought he gave better speeches than the one on the steps of Parliament House that day: "Well may we say ...". I asked what he thought of Max Phipps's portrayal of him in the 1983 mini-series *The Dismissal*. "I am sure I could have done a better job," he said. (I also asked Malcolm Fraser what he thought about his portrayal by John Stanton. Fraser said he was "reasonably" pleased.)

Critics often said the dismissal made Gough a martyr. "I want to be remembered as an achiever," he said many times. His policy and political legacy is more significant than the chaos of his government and ignominy of his dismissal.

Gough sent me handwritten notes attached to speeches and articles he had written. His notes would always be dated with the month in Roman numerals. He would autograph letters as "EG Whitlam" or "Gough Whitlam" or just "Gough". He signed books, pamphlets and photos. What I cherish the most is a photo he signed and dedicated to my daughter, Madison, in 2006.

There are many more things I wish I had asked him and I regret not writing down his answers more fully than I did. When it was time to leave his office in November 2013, we shook hands and posed for a photo. "Thank you for calling on me," he said.

Gough's foreword to this book of essays was to be his "valedictory" message to the Labor Party and to Australia. It was his last public statement. He wanted the party to draw its sense of "identity and purpose" from its past but stressed the "overarching principle" of his life and work was "contemporary relevance".

Gough offered me a window into Australia's past. While his policy and political legacy has endured, he was always focused on what's next: the future.

This is an edited extract from Troy Bramston's preface to a revised edition of *The Whitlam Legacy* (ed.) published by The Federation Press.

