The Making of a Labor Martyr

Frank Carrigan

PARTS OF HIS AGENDA SURVIVED THE TEST OF TIME

Brannston celebrates Hayden "as the one minister who must clearly confront 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 spilled the end of market interventionist theories and the wave of regulatory reform that Brannston trumpets as the legacy of Whitlam.

The capitalization of the Whitlam government to the creeds of keeping state intervention in the market to a minimum resists no lasting benefit. Its piling figures were dire and damaging scandals added to its woes.

The standard note. Predictably, ministerial sexual misdemeanours were a feature. But the cardinal one described in according to Secon notes that the fact the Whitlam government "had 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 carjacker employed to broker loans unleashed mayhem. The whole episode became, in Tiffen's words, "a policy folly so a grand scale". It claimed a ministerial scalp for misleading parliament, and gave Fraser a critical note 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 in light of the Whitlam government "had 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 carjacker employed to broker loans unleashed mayhem. The whole episode became, in Tiffen's words, "a policy folly so a grand scale". It claimed a ministerial scalp for misleading parliament, and gave Fraser a critical note in his crusade to block supply and force Whitlam's demise."

For history to view defeated leaders with a wider frame, there must be rituals to sing the 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 at Australia's prime minister, Bramston has put together a collection of essays on a book 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 valuable 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 influencing 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 welfare liberal, was "driven by key values of equality, tolerance and self-determination". Whitlam's vision is 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 endorsed any nationalization 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 ministers forged a program based on government creating the social goods the market was incapable of delivering. Key achievements were a need-based schools policy and a national health system that Britain had pioneered in the 60s. He also promoted the development of a burgeoning resource sector, and programs to overcomes 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 visions contended with a change in the economic and social pattern success 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 unfliching in depicting the chaos that ensnared 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 itch 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 Cusan, supported by other ministers, was urging deep cuts in spending to contain inflation. Prominent ministers such as the former economics minister Jim Cairns remained wedded to orthodox Keynesianism and proclaimed the need to boost spending and put 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 curtailing spending and the state's withdrawal from many areas of providing social goods. Whitlam vacillated, but for a time courageous 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.