

The Whitlam Legacy

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Forty years on, this book tells a tale which is still exhilarating and devastating. Awe inspiring in what it reveals of the extent of policy preparation and shocking in its revelation of the failure to engage the processes to make it happen. Editor and contributor Troy Bramston himself is obviously torn by the heights and the depths to which his analysis of the Whitlam Government phenomenon – through its Cabinet papers – takes him. His summary on pages 110-111 says it all:

Lifting off the pages is the tragic realisation that the circumstances which led to the loans affair – which in turn led to the dismissal – could have been avoided if public service advice was followed, if there were better oversight of Ministers, if Cabinet instructions were adhered to and if Cabinet processes were more effectively administered.

All entering parliament and/or aspiring to a political career should read this book – and reflect on it in the light of what became of subsequent Labor governments.

Paul Kelly provides us with a fresh look at the dismissal in the light of newly available documents, some of which are included in an appendix. However, perhaps because these are unlikely to change the minds of those who still sit so firmly on one side of the fence or the other in this matter, it is not the unravelling of this issue which is the most striking feature of this volume. Rather,

in a collection of mostly excellent essays, it is the astonishing range of achievements of Whitlam's brief tenure, how enduring the consequent changes have been and, most specifically, the telling of the reasons why.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

How much we learn from reading this volume about how policy must be made, how the electorate must be informed, consulted and persuaded, how important the speech is to develop, articulate and promote policy and how central in this is the place of the parliament! How much of this, too, helps explain much more recent disasters when much

less experienced politicians thought they could pluck policy panaceas out of the air and run with them, with none of the extraordinarily extensive ground work that was done by Edward Gough Whitlam in what Graham Freudenberg calls his fourteen seminal years on the back bench. It is telling and it is timely to bring this aspect to light, especially in some superb policy chapters, in which (most often) those involved recall the planning and preparation in their areas, often over years, the difficulties involved, and the doing of it. As well, these chapters, such as Brian Howe's on social policy, Michael Hogan's on education, John Deeble's on health and George Williams's on law reform for example, put the Whitlam government's policies in historical context and trace the fate and fortunes of those changes from that time. In some of the contributions to this volume there is naturally a little of the 'success has a thousand fathers...' syndrome as their authors naturally and rightly assert their place in this grand history. This only adds to the picture of the breadth and depth of, perhaps, this most impressive and important characteristic of those times – the policy making process. We all know that leaders don't/can't do it all on their own (though watching the Keating interviews towards the end of 2013 you would wonder whether anyone else was there!) But leadership makes it happen. Thus Susan Ryan, emphasising Whitlam's strong commitment to the equality of women and his determination to use a range of international instruments to fulfil what he saw to be Australia's responsibilities in this respect, also points out the debt he owed to the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), in which Ryan herself was involved. Ralph Willis, too, claims credit for the equal pay for women achievement as he did the advocacy work beforehand. In a history of health policy from the war to the present day recording the phenomenal difficulties involved, John Deeble argues that Whitlam's policy was based on the work he had done which enabled him to move so quickly and effectively on a well worked through set of proposals. His 'Implications' concluding section is a brilliant statement of the policy making process, how the context creates constraints, and how persistence, often over years is required to achieve the goal: it was unfinished business until Hawke's Accord achieved willingness of the unions to trade off universal health insurance for wage increases (p184).

In his chapter on 'Foreign and Defence Policy', Gordon Bilney presents himself as the, then, proud diplomat playing his part in the sea changes to Australia's foreign policy which made his life so much more 'respectable' on the international stage. Bilney points to what he describes as the unprecedented absence of bipartisanship in both foreign and defence policies in the 1972 campaign. This was explained in a press conference of 5 December as a more independent stance in international affairs, one less militarily oriented nor open to suggestions of racism (p272). It included ratification or accession to a long list of international conventions, especially on racial intolerance and gender equality, and it meant changes of policy on China's recognition, participation in the Vietnam War, on South Africa, on Southern Rhodesia and on Palestine, where Australia's vote in the United Nations was changed from abstention to support of condemnatory resolutions in the first two cases and to reversal in the case of Palestine. (Compare this with Australia's most recent government which has also reversed Australia's vote on Palestine, without public discussion, announcement or explanation, unravelling years of being, in Gareth Evans terms 'on the right side of history' in this matter). Bilney describes changes which were as dramatic in the

foreign affairs area as elsewhere and often just as long in the gestation. Freudenberg, for example, recalls (p48) that Whitlam advocated Australia's recognition of China as early as 1954 – even before it became official ALP policy – and Bilney notes that Whitlam visited Papua New Guinea (PNG) six times before 1971 and understood well the (international) decolonisation imperative which allowed for nothing less than the rapid movement of PNG to independence.

Bill Morrison, perhaps due to his training as a diplomat, makes this last achievement look much easier than it was. Writing as the Minister for Territories responsible for the transition of PNG through self-government to independence, he under plays the issues arising. He is correct in his conclusion that there was no enthusiasm in PNG itself for the rapid move to independence and certainly not among the majority of the PNG Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC). However, Morrison is wrong in his assertion that the CPC simply wanted to delay independence. He neglects to record that there was also a radical nationalistic voice (essentially Somare, Momis and Kaputin) as well as a reluctant and conservative one there which – far from trying to delay independence – was working, rather, to secure the Constitution they wanted for an independent PNG which differed in some key respects from the one designed for them by Australia. This would include, in particular, recognition of the need for decentralisation in the form of regional government (in the face of the then quite real threats of the potential secession of Papua, Bougainville and the Tolais of the Gazelle Peninsula), and included stringent qualifications for PNG citizenship.

Putting on the record the extraordinary strength of the policy preparation process over years, and the tools used (not least the speech) for doing so, is a major achievement of this volume. Former Prime Minister Keating is on record for making this point and, most recently, so too is former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in his launch of Bob Carr's 'Diaries of a Foreign Minister'. In his (beautifully written) chapter Graham Freudenberg illustrates the point in the context of health policy when he states that it 'evolved ...'(including from a focus on hospitals to health insurance) '...through countless speeches between 1967-1972. The end result was Medibank, so thoroughly worked out and entrenched in those speeches that seven attempts by the Fraser Government over seven years to dismantle Medibank could not prevent its resurrection in the new and stronger form of Medicare....' (p46). More generally, Freudenberg describes the 'Its Time' policy speech as the most thoroughly prepared speech in Australian history and the distillation of a decade of policy development (p42).

IMPLEMENTATION

'Crash through'? It was no such thing – as the accounts of the policy development effort in this volume make quite clear – unless that persistent descriptor of the Whitlam government is quarantined to style not substance. In chapter nine, Troy Bramston concludes that there were more groundbreaking decisions in those first fourteen days of the duumvirate than there had been since Federation. However, he sees Whitlam's huge flaw as impatience with process and a determination to 'just do it' as he believed he had a mandate – a point also made by many of the contributors to this volume. 'Whitlam's decisions suffered because he

was too decisive and disinclined to debate' (p100). Though the point, surely, is that he had done all that. So is it the sheer figures that lead him to this conclusion, those 40 decisions in 14 days; the 823 formal submissions to Cabinet and 221 bills in 1973; in 1974 626 submissions and 1264 decisions; in 1975 516 submissions and 1,090 decisions, which he notes is in huge contrast with the previous government?

When Whitlam had done it all in the policy preparatory stakes, and even worked out how to get around what were the Constitutional blocks which had stalled Chifley's attempts at reform ('Labor's aims could be achieved without resorting to nationalisation or government controls but simply by providing better government services, Carol Johnson, p358), it is staggering that the preparatory work did not extend to process. So from awe at the preparation, even of the press, but not, ironically of Murdoch, we swing to despair at the implementation. (Eric Walsh records the work Whitlam himself did, as well as his office, on preparing the press: 'no Prime Minister before or since has made himself so openly accessible' (p149). However, he also records that he stood up Murdoch, twice, for dinner when 'no one outside the Labor Party itself had done more than Rupert Murdoch to assist Labor's 1972 victory' (p183). No attention was given to administrative arrangements in preparation for government, or afterwards and this extended to Cabinet and its processes; the result was feral. There was no understanding of the responsibilities of Cabinet government as it came to be developed in the dramatic aftermath of its own disasters in a situation in which when ministers 'lost' in Cabinet, they could take their case back to Caucus. This was insanity. Yet Moss Cass, Minister for the Environment and Conservation – and clearly one of the burrs in Whitlam's saddle – is still defiant on this point (p347).

The results made for turning points both for the public service and for Cabinet government. For the former, John Nethercote takes the opportunity, which this 40 year perspective provides, to draw out the longer term consequences for the evolution of the public service from changes introduced at that time. These included the inevitable growth of the public service with all the new programmes to be implemented, the introduction of the ministerial staffer largely on account of the new government's distrust of the public service, and the beginning of the politicisation of the public service with the appointment of John Menadue and Peter Wilenski as head of the Prime Minister's Department and the Public Service Board respectively. These developments, Nethercote concludes, made for the beginning of the end of the grand tradition of the provision of frank and fearless advice in favour of 'responsiveness'. As for the Cabinet, Ralph Willis, a backbencher at the time, concludes the chaos of those days was the genesis of the principle of Cabinet solidarity introduced by Prime Minister Hawke on his succession to the next Labor Government in 1983. Willis also points to three lessons he learnt from his alarming ringside seat at the Whitlam Government table which were to serve the next Labor government so well. These were: that the social programme must be subject to sound economic policy; that economic reform must be graduated and achieved consultatively and with concomitant structural adjustment assistance; and, that dealing with stagflation required more than conventional fiscal and monetary policy (p122). So yes, perhaps there did indeed have to be a Whitlam-style government before there could have been a Hawke-style government.

THE ECONOMY

Ironically, as it turned out, economic mismanagement featured strongly in the campaign that brought the Whitlam government to power in 1972 (p167), but this has perhaps been lost to history because of what followed. Enough has been said about economic policy management, or mismanagement, by this government over the years, though it is still startling to see from some first hand accounts how shocking things were. The forty year perspective from which John O'Mahony is able to examine the Whitlam government's economic record is a useful one – though his conclusions are perhaps overly benign. (He even suggests if we 'counted' then as we count now, it would all look very different). From this distance, he argues that the shifts in the international environment negatively affecting Australia can be seen more clearly. He also argues that the Whitlam era straddled the hiatus between old economics and new (p166), it was one in which the policy consensus over economic management rapidly unravelled and the traditional levers of economic policy abruptly malfunctioned. This situation was exacerbated by excessive growth in wages and government spending. He lets lie the causes and consequences of those two trends and it is left to Bramston to be more blunt. He points out that no one was listening to Crean or Treasury. Cairns (who emerges in this volume as utterly economically and personally irresponsible and quite unsuited for government), replaced Crean and Whitlam instructed his Prime Ministers department to take over economic strategy. There followed the disastrous loans affair.

Through all this emerges (for so many of the contributors to this volume: Bramston, Howe, Nethercote, Deeble, O'Mahony, Easson) the quiet sanity and strength of William George Hayden, and not just on the economic front. In his strong statement of the quality of the policy preparation effort, Howe records Hayden's commitment to research-based reform (p198). John Nethercote (p141) reports the orderly approach he brought which laid the foundation for budget making for several decades, including for the first time, the creation of an Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) of Cabinet. More significantly perhaps, from the very first budget, as Acting Treasurer, Hayden was warning about the imbalances of revenue and expenditure and urging Cabinet to reduce spending to combat 'runaway inflation'. Bramston concludes that, from his study of the Cabinet papers of this period it is '... Hayden who emerges ... as the one Minister who most clearly understood the economic and budgetary challenges ... advocated the most sensible policies in response' (pp107-8) and provided 'politically prescient advice' (p111).

THE CONTEXT

Of course, it all came tumbling down anyway, fell in on its own flaws or had the misfortune to find itself in an extraordinarily hostile environment. Rodney Tiffen tells us that the obstacles pitted against this government included an opposition which ruthlessly refused to accept the legitimacy of Labor: 'the chilling reality is that in three years the Whitlam Government sought supply six times and only on one of those occasions...did the Opposition parties not speculate about blocking it' (p162). The opposition's determination

‘...to cause maximum disruption...Its ‘stop- at- nothing’ approach ...breaching long-standing conventions...’ (p122) was one marked impression left on Ralph Willis, then a fresh backbencher. Geoff Kitney recalls (p372) that ‘the conservative forces were as ruthlessly driven as if on a moral crusade’; Senator Peter Durack told him they were determined to get rid of the government at whatever price (p372). Kep Enderby makes the point with the figures (p335): the Senate rejected 93 bills between 1972-1975 when in the 71 years since Federation before that, only 68 bills had been rejected. There were also enough incidents of public sector recalcitrance – Waller’s reluctance to implement the recognition of China (p151); Tange’s objection to the decision to withdraw from Vietnam (p152), to draw the same conclusion about them. Add this to the fact of the inherent conservatism of the establishments in sectors targeted for reform and their resistance to change, a dramatically shifting international economic environment, and an idealistic, naive and amateur Cabinet which resisted all suggestions of discipline, or economic discipline in those circumstances, and there you have it.

CONCLUSION

Trials and tribulations, triumphs – and irreversible turning points. In George Williams’ view, the key was law reform: ‘Whitlam’s influence upon the law remains profound in areas ranging from human rights to trade practices law to family law. In these and other areas, the Whitlam Government laid the foundations of the modern Australian legal system. ‘By altering the law, he brought about long term change that no subsequent government has been able to displace’ (p288). With forty years’ hindsight the authors in this volume are able to see just how much changed forever and not just in the many policy sectors. As noted, Nethercote concludes that the period marked the end of an era in the public service (pp144-5). Nick Cater points out that the Labor Party, ‘the workers’ party was itself transformed from a bastion of social conservatism into a progressive reform movement’ (p52). There was an irreversible change in the way political campaigns were run: TV replaced the back of a truck and the town hall meeting and technology took over the office where in the beginning there wasn’t even a fax. As well, in Cater’s view, the ‘It’s Time’ campaign was the start of an obsession with the methodology of winning elections which eventually began to overwhelm the democratic process to our cost to this day (p57). Leigh Hatcher concludes that Australia was never again to see such a clear differentiation between Australia’s two major parties after which more and more they curled themselves up into smaller and smaller targets (p307) and politics was replaced by performance. This was the time, too, when the media began its inexorable shift from the role of observer and reporter to actor and party principal. Hatcher dates the change in the power balance between the press and politicians to this time (p308), the press tasted blood and were after scalps (p307). Tiffen takes up this point too. Describing Cairns and Connor and the loans affair and the ‘determined circumvention of democratic accountability that they represented, as policy folly on a grand scale’ (p164), he concludes its most lasting effect ‘was the dramatic demonstration of the efficacy of scandals.’(p161).

A strength of this volume is its mix of 39 contributors. They represent the passionately involved, the observers, the actors, the opponents, the sceptics (though few of these) and the scholars who came later to this episode as history. There are those who were there then – as ministers, minders, willing workhorses of policy development, props (Little Pattie), press men, or apprentices – those who watched with baited breath from the sidelines (Bilney, Carr, Jones, Ryan, Willis, Howe and Kerin) – and the historians who came after who are perhaps best able to put this era in more objective context. Bramston is one of these – and his contributions are huge – and so is Carol Johnson. She is a Labor historian who puts Whitlam's policies in the continuum of Labor leaders through to Julia Gillard. Theirs is (still) a brutal, shocking, exhilarating story with much of the passion still raw as the tales are told of this roller-coaster ride through three reckless years of political history. There are some marvellously gripping accounts, Geoff Kitney's, for example, wonderfully written, beginning by taking Gough through the huge trees of the Tasmanian wilderness when campaigners felt it safer to expose him to trees than to people in that disastrous 1977 election campaign. It may be no coincidence in this still breathless, high risk, high stakes and high drama account of a near terrorised young journalist all these years later as though he were still there then, late at night, glass of red in hand, that there are more typos in this chapter than in the rest of this book volume together!

Those there then put the problems plainly on the table and those who came after them make some clear eyed assessments. This is no hagiography. Gordon Bilney makes it clear that Whitlam fell short on East Timor and the Baltic States for example (p278-9), Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope that the Whitlam Government had been 'parsimonious with both its immigration numbers and its outward demonstration of compassion towards refugees' (p 247), Michael Easson that its industrial relations changes were poorly thought through (p227), Nick Cater that some critical warning signs were ignored (p 53), and Barry Jones that Whitlam 'made some serious errors of political judgement...on people and appointments' (p382). While the overwhelming theme running through this book is of just how much changed on account of the Whitlam government, and mostly for the better, its authors do not shy away from making quite clear what the shortcomings and shortfalls were, and that there were many.

The 'ifs' of this history: Cairns, Connor, Kerr and Cabinet. If only Cairns, Connor and Kerr had not been there to do what they did, and if only Cabinet had been made to work as it should, the Whitlam government story may well have been a very different one. Yet it was remarkable anyway. Bramston's description of the Whitlam Government's achievements (pp xvii-xviii) is astonishing. Of Keating's categorisation of leaders as straight men, fixers or maddies, Gough must surely join Keating in the pantheon he put himself of maddies, for only maddies would dare to do so much. It was revolutionary in the true sense of that word. He changed Australia, its policies, its perspective, its outlook, its orientation – and he began the process of making Australia a truly independent nation.

The 'So What' question? All entering parliament and/or aspiring to a political career should read this book – and reflect on it in the light of what became of subsequent Labor governments.