

## 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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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have written about their experiences, such as Kim Beazley Snr, *Father of the House: The Memoirs of Kim E. Beazley* (Freemantle Press, 2009); Bill Hayden, *Hayden: An Autobiography* (Angus and Robertson, 1996); Tom Uren, *Straight Left* (Random House, 1994); and Fred Daly, *From Curtin to Kerr* (Sun Books, 1977). There are several other accounts of Labor in this period, including Clem Lloyd and Gordon Reid's informative *Out of the Wilderness* (Cassell, 1974); the astute Alan Reid's *The Whitlam Venture* (Hill of Content, 1976); and Billy Griffiths' fine account of Whitlam's 1971 visit to China, *The China Breakthrough* (Monash University Publishing, 2012). Sadly, Richard Hall's biography of Whitlam's pre-prime ministerial life, *First Days*, remains unpublished.<sup>10</sup> The best books on the dismissal are Paul Kelly's *November 1975* (Allen & Unwin, 1995) and its predecessor *The Unmaking of Gough* (Angus & Robertson, 1976; Allen & Unwin, 1994). Sybil Nolan's edited collection, *The Dismissal* (MUP, 2005), provides a number of interesting eye-witness accounts. Several key players have written on the dismissal: Sir John Kerr in *Matters for Judgment: An Autobiography* (Macmillan, 1978; Sun Books, 1988); Malcolm Fraser (and Margaret Simons) in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* (MUP, 2010); Sir Garfield Barwick in *Sir John Did His Duty* (Serendip Publications, 1983) and *A Radical Tory* (The Federation Press, 1995); John Menadue in *Things You Learn Along The Way* (David Lovell, 1999); and Sir David Smith in *Head of State* (Macleay Press, 2005). Michael Sexton also provides an account of the dismissal, and the broader travails of the government, in *The Great Crash* (Scribe, 2003) and in its earlier version, *Illusions of Power* (Allen & Unwin, 1979). Finally, there are Whitlam's scholarly contributions, including his magnum opus, *The Whitlam Government: 1972-1975* (Penguin, 1985), *Abiding Interests* (UQP, 1997) and *The Truth of the Matter* (Penguin, 1979; Penguin, 1983; MUP, 2005). There is no shortage of books on the Whitlam government. 'Indeed', as Whitlam said at the launch of *The Whitlam Government*, 'for a number of years up to 1983, the Whitlam book industry was our largest growth industry after tax avoidance'.<sup>11</sup>

This book begins with a prologue that chronicles Whitlam's political ascendancy and then divides into five parts. First, 'The Whitlam Years and Political Style', examines the impact of Whitlam against the backdrop of the 1960s and 1970s; an analysis of elections, the story of the opposition during the Whitlam years; and an insight into Whitlam's communication skills. Part Two, 'Managing Government', looks at how the cabinet and the public service operated, the role of Whitlam's personal office, Whitlam's relations with the media and life as a backbencher in the government. Part Three, 'Policy and the Whitlam Government', addresses policy achievements and failures. The fourth part on 'The Dismissal' has several detailed accounts of the 1975 constitutional crisis. Finally, 'Reflections and Assessments' brings together personal accounts from former ministers and essays from the academy, journalism and politics to give the reader an overall assessment of the

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government's place in Australian history. An epilogue by the editor recalls the swearing-in of the first full Whitlam ministry. The appendices provide a record of all three ministries, a series of front pages of *The Australian* and a collection of archival documents relating to the dismissal. There are also many photographs throughout the book that recall the iconic figures and indelible moments of the period.

## Coda

Early in the evening of 11 June 1974, Gough Whitlam arrived at Government House to talk to Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck.<sup>12</sup> At the midpoint of the government, Hasluck – a political veteran with an astute understanding of history – offered Whitlam the opportunity to unburden himself by sharing the challenges he faced and to seek his counsel. Hasluck offered advice 'in a fatherly way'. For nearly an hour they discussed the recent reshuffle of the ministry, the 'dead wood' that remained and the 'reservations' they both shared about the 'fiercely ambitious' Cairns, who had just been elected deputy leader. Then Hasluck delivered his assessment of the government – what he called 'a little homily'<sup>13</sup> – in the wake of the 1974 election:

[T]he electorate had decided to give him 'a fair go'. He was still on probation. The electors generally welcomed the signs of purpose, energy and determination in his ministry. A new spirit was coming in Australia and his government had seemed to many people to be expressing this new spirit and setting out with a new purpose.

He noted Whitlam's superiority to opposition leader Snedden. But then a warning: 'Many people had been displeased. He did not get a strong majority because he had offended or scared too many sections of the populace. Mostly it had been unnecessary to do so', he said. 'If a matter of principle or conscience was involved and if there was a clear national interest to be served by all means go ahead, even if the action were likely to be unpopular. But why lose votes by doing something that did not involve conscience or principle and did not serve any clear national purpose?' Finally, he summed up his advice: 'I thought he and the government might stop searching for fleas on every dog that ran out in the street and barked at them'. This was a perceptive reading of the government. Hasluck said Whitlam had time to turn it around. After all, it would be three years until the next election. But there would not be three more years. The government was dismissed on Remembrance Day, 1975.

As I compiled this book, I was energised not by the lingering unjustness of the dismissal but rather the lasting legacy of the Whitlam years. It is a legacy that extends to the rebirth of Labor in the 1960s to almost every area of policy and to the way politics is practised in the modern era. But there is,

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as I argue, another conclusion to be drawn. Whitlam was the personification of leadership in politics. He was in politics for a purpose. He had big ideas, bold ambitions and was determined to achieve them. The government was larger than life. For many, it was an exhilarating and exciting time. For others, Whitlam was a polarising figure who challenged and upended long-established policies and the settled way of everyday life. Without question, Whitlam's style was as instrumental to Labor's success as it was inexorably linked to Labor's destruction.

It is often argued that there was another way; the 'crash through or crash' model of leadership was an indulgence that inevitably cost Labor power. But given the forces hostile to Whitlam's reform agenda inside and outside the party, there really was no other way. Without Whitlam, it is doubtful whether Labor would have survived as a viable political force beyond the 1960s or that any government would have so profoundly remade Australia in so many areas of public policy. Whitlam is unlike any other Prime Minister. He was an authentic trailblazer. No Prime Minister has had a bigger personal impact on policy, politics and public life. The legacy endures because, in the final analysis, Edward Gough Whitlam understood what politics is fundamentally about: leadership.