EDWARD GOUGH WHITLAM AC QC

1916–2014

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When Gough Whitlam was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1993, he had served terms as Australian Ambassador to UNESCO and as a member of its executive board; he had chaired the Council of the National Gallery of Australia and the China-Australia Council; he had served on the Senate of the University of Sydney and held visiting posts at several Australian universities as well as Harvard (after initiating the chair of Australian studies there). During a visiting fellowship at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1978 he confessed himself 'unutterably bored' and with H. C. (Nugget) Coombs, his friend and fellow-resident at University House, implored academics to raise their voices. But no other politician did more for universities, education and the arts.

Gough Whitlam was born in Melbourne in 1916, the son of a Commonwealth public servant in the crown solicitor's office. From his father Fred he acquired a love of books and learning, and from his mother Martha he inherited height, strong opinions and a sharp tongue. Fred had trained as an accountant and acquired legal qualifications by evening study; he quickly came to the attention of Robert Garran, the Solicitor-General, and was promoted two years later to a post in Sydney, then assistant crown solicitor in Canberra in 1927. As crown solicitor from 1937 he was closely involved in the drafting of wartime legislation and post-war reconstruction. Fred and Martha were devout Baptists and teetotallers, lovers of the arts (though Martha was deaf) and imbued with an ethos of civic service. Their son Gough abandoned formal worship, imbibed moderately, delighted in most cultural forms and devoted his talents to the public betterment.

Like Thomas Macaulay, the child spoke from the outset in perfectly formed sentences. His schooling began in Sydney and was completed in Canberra, where he excelled in languages, history and literature. He completed an honours degree in Arts at the University of Sydney in English, Latin and Greek, with the intention of becoming a classicist; extra-curricular interests affected his results, so in 1938 he began an LL.B. Through his membership of the university dramatic society he met Margaret Dovey and it was through her father William Dovey KC that he became a judge's associate in 1941. Shortly after marrying Margaret in 1942, Gough began training in the RAAF and served subsequently as a navigator in northern Australia and the Pacific. He completed his law degree after the war as a beneficiary of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, acquired a block of land in Cronulla with a war service home loan and supplemented his income by winning a national quiz competition for two successive years.

From boyhood Whitlam had extensive literary interests and a capacious memory. Like Barry Jones, who was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Academy in the same year (1993), his celebrity as a quiz champion assisted his entry into politics. He joined the Labor Party in 1945 after campaigning vigorously in favour of the referendum to extend the Labor government's reconstruction powers, for which his father prepared the legislation. After unsuccessful attempts to enter local government and the state parliament, he obtained pre-selection for the federal seat of Werriwa and won a by-election in 1952.

Many in the Caucus regarded him as an interloper. His background, manner, cutting remarks and remorseless didacticism – and perhaps most of all, his impatience with shibboleths of the Labor Party – aroused resentment. He avoided the members' bar and billiard room, had little interest in reviving the party's

socialist objective, though he did believe in the politics of equality. The lesson he drew from the leadership of Curtin and Chifley in the 1940s was that a purposeful Labor government could use the powers of the Commonwealth to expand public provision and eliminate inequality. Without equality, he held, there could be no proper freedom.

In his early years in parliament Whitlam supported Bert Evatt, especially as Evatt resisted the threat to civil liberties in the Cold War, but the young backbencher came to think that the senior members of the Party were mired in the past. With the sustained economic growth of the 1950s, the task was not to ration scarcity but to plan for abundance; hence his dictum that welfare in conditions of affluence was determined less and less on things which individuals obtain for themselves, and more and more on the things which the community provides all its members. A corollary was the need to reach out beyond wage-earners to professionals, and extend from traditional working-class politics to embrace the increasing cultural diversity.

Whitlam practised politics with a new professionalism. An accomplished parliamentary debater, he was assiduous in drawing on expert advice to develop policies and in expounding them to the public with reasoned argument. As successive electoral defeats threatened to consign Labor to the wilderness, his intelligence and persistence persuaded Caucus colleagues they needed him. He prevailed over the old guard to win the deputy leadership in 1960, but found Arthur Calwell and the 'faceless men' of the federal conference more persistent obstacles to his ambitions. His response was to embark on a confrontational campaign for party reform, prefiguring the tactic of 'crash through or crash' that would mark his years as prime minister. Similarly, the delay in wresting the leadership of the party from Calwell lent impatience to his subsequent actions. The post-war long boom, on which his programme of reform was based, was drawing to a close by 1972; from the outset his period in office was marked by the urgency of awareness that the government was on borrowed time.

There has probably never been a government that came to office in Australia with such fully formulated intentions so extensively declared. Whitlam had developed the policies that would guide his ministry over more than a decade. He attached particular importance to research, constantly gathering information and using it to devise and refine his detailed proposals. This was the Program, the capital letter signifying its scriptural status, and he expounded it at every available opportunity. He was the first Labor leader to assign portfolios to his caucus executive, and the shadow ministers were expected to master their component of the Program.

After winning the 1972 election, Whitlam was thus able to give immediate effect to many of his campaign commitments during his first ministry, one consisting of just two members, himself and his deputy, that lasted fourteen days until the Caucus elected the other ministers. This, as he styled it, was the duumvirate and the only federal ministry to be composed entirely of war veterans. In contrast, Caucus insisted that all 27 ministers who were sworn into office at the end of the year should be members of the Cabinet. The effect was to impair it as a policy body, and while Whitlam was unrelenting in his determination to give effect to the Program, the accident-prone government was soon beset by crisis and conflict. Especially in the case of his choice and dealings with the Governor-General, Whitlam's overweening confidence proved fatal.

In a eulogy at Whitlam's funeral Noel Pearson hailed the transformation that the Whitlam government effected in its three short years: 'The country would change forever'. Reminding the congregation of how Jewish insurgents ranted against Roman tyranny in *The Life of Brian*, Pearson asked what did Whitlam do for us?

> Apart from Medibank and the Trade Practices Act, cutting tariff protections and no-fault divorce in the Family Law Act, the Australia Council, the Federal Court, the Order of Australia, federal legal aid and the Racial Discrimination Act, needs-based school funding, the recognition of China, the abolition of conscription, student financial assistance, the Heritage Commission, non-discriminatory immigration rules, community health clinics, Aboriginal land rights, paid maternity leave for public servants, lowering the minimum voting to 18 years and fair electoral boundaries and Senate representation for the territories.
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> Apart from all this, what did this Roman ever do for us?

The answer is that he did much more, for women, immigrants, the disadvantaged and the homeless, for human rights, the independence of Papua New Guinea – and education. He believed that everyone in a modern, progressive society should be able to develop their talent and their interests to the full. If the light on the hill was a hallmark of Chifley's prime ministership, a light on every student's desk was a guiding principle of his successor. Apart from the creation of the Australian Schools Commission, which trebled Commonwealth funding to schools, his government assumed full responsibility for higher education, abolished university fees, raised up the teachers' colleges and increased outlays fourfold. By 1975 public expenditure on education reached 5.6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product, a level higher than today.

The mounting problems of the Whitlam government, the Dismissal and then the dismantling of a good part of what he had brought into being cast him into despondency. In the new parliament Whitlam was a shadow of the politician he had been, swinging between petulance, anger and depression, more reliant than ever on the companionship and robust advice of Margaret, who was increasingly active in her own public roles. It was characteristic that when offered the ambassador's post to UNESCO in 1983, he said he would first have to consult Josephine. He recovered his spirits to live a rich and diverse life after politics, publishing a study of *The Italian Inspiration in English Literature* (1980) as well as several works designed to vindicate his time in his office. When John Faulkner interviewed him in 2002 and insisted he consider his failings since a documentary could not be a hagiography, he responded 'Why not, comrade?'

Many Fellows will have their memories of Gough Whitlam in his autumnal years. I recall two occasions. The first was when he spoke at a memorial gathering for the writer Frank Hardy at the Collingwood town hall in 1994. His relationship with Frank Hardy formed around the fight for the Gurindji people following the Wave Hill walk-off and he began by reminding the audience of the provisions of the Commonwealth constitution that govern its role in Indigenous affairs. It was an exhaustive treatment of the subject and threatened to overtax his audience until he happened to glance down at the coffin, covered in a red flag with hammer and sickle, and broke down in tears.

My second memory is an evening a decade later after an enterprising history postgraduate at the University of Melbourne invited the former prime minister to give a keynote address to a conference he and his friends had organised. Gough agreed, subject to the condition that I should chair his address, and he arrived brandishing a script that would have occupied a full day. I reminded him of the short attention span of the young, but his lecture on constitutional history, this time on the external affairs power, stretched past an hour with no end in sight until he caught my eye with a look of triumph and abruptly declared himself finished. We then adjourned to a dinner at which he and Margaret drew out each of the postgraduate students on their research project and plans. Gough had something to say about every subject, while Margaret's warm interest was qualified only by her determination to get him into a car by midnight. The magnetic effect on these young scholars testified to the loss to the academy when Gough Whitlam decided on a career in politics. We are all the beneficiaries of his choice.

STUART MACINTYRE AO FAHA FASSA