



## **Gough Whitlam and the Social Democratic Imagination: the challenge for contemporary public policy**

Conference Rooms at the Female Orphan School Western Sydney University,  
Parramatta Campus Cnr James Ruse Drive and Victoria Road, Rydalmere  
NSW 2116

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*Gough Whitlam's vision of social democracy with a focus on parliament and party*

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### **Gough Whitlam – a Leader not a Follower.**

Gough Whitlam was committed to the concept of evidence as a precondition to action. He had a passion for evidence (I suppose now we would call it 'information') and education, convinced that if only the facts were revealed, prejudice, ignorance and sectional interest would fall away. It did not always happen. As the late Clem Lloyd wrote, his central characteristic was 'a remorseless didacticism'.

He liked to speak at length and on the subjects that currently engaged him – ratification of ILO Conventions, uniform railway gauges, UNESCO's World Heritage system, Medibank, altering the Commonwealth Constitution. He gave long, lucid speeches, incorporating the odd witticism, but devoted to explaining, explaining, explaining. Sometimes he went on too long and audiences could feel fatigued, but he never short-changed them or talked down to them.

Contrary to the widely held view, Whitlam understood the fundamentals of economics and the implications of globalisation for Australia, although it was certainly not his topic of choice.

John Hyde's book *Dry* (2003) identifies only two Labor MPs who indicated some understanding of and sympathy for C. R. (Bert) Kelly's long campaign against tariffs. Gough Whitlam was one, Reg Pollard the other.

He was uncomfortable with the current definition of humans as *homo economicus*, whose primary purpose is shopping and consumption, customers, producers, seen purely in an economic context. Education, health, the life of the mind are all seen as commodities and the environment as an area to exploit. All values can be measured in dollars – if they can't be quantified, they have no value.

His knowledge and range of interests were encyclopaedic. No other Australian Prime Minister has written with such authority on a variety of topics, for example the intermarriage of Italian and Balkan royalty, British royal bastards in Australia, or the British honours system. Not only was he *prima donna assoluta*, but an authentic polymath too.

The *magnum opus* *The Whitlam Government 1972-75*, contains 20 chapters, one an overview, and 19 on specific policy areas. The chapter on 'The Economy' is comprehensive, well written and well argued, an effective rebuttal to the conventional wisdom that Whitlam was an economic agnostic. The book's range is impressive, with chapters on 'Aborigines', 'Migrants', 'Women', 'Arts, Letters and Media'. Indeed the only significant omissions are 'Science and Technology' and 'Sport'.

He had no feeling for science at all and there was a punitive element in his demotion of Clyde Cameron from being Minister for Labour to being Minister for Science. He told me that that he did not propose to read *Sleepers, Wake!* 'Far too erudite for me, Comrade!', he laughed.

I found it impossible to engage his interest in science, technology or research. I wrote only one speech for him, when he launched the revised edition of Christopher Sexton's biography of Sir Macfarlane Burnet in Melbourne in June 1999 and I was flattered that he stuck to the text.

If I had to choose his greatest single achievement as Prime Minister it would be that he took the demonology out of foreign policy, and replaced it with rational strategic analysis.

Whitlam's foreign policy methodology, with its reliance on evidence and analysis, was continued by Malcolm Fraser's government, and then by Hawke and Keating, a 24 year stretch from 1972 to 1996, then reversed under Howard, restored, more or less, under Rudd-Gillard-Rudd, and reversed again, Julie Bishop notwithstanding, under Tony Abbott in 2013, and likely to be modified again by Turnbull.

## The Social Democratic imagination

I like the term ‘Social Democratic imagination’ but it is hard to define, and elusive to find. Forty years on from the Dismissal we have a lot of territory to cover.

In the Whitlam era, there was considerable optimism about the future of Social Democracy – but sudden events in particular years since 1975 changed all that. The most important ones were 1979, 1989, 1994, 2001 and 2015.

In February **1979**, the Islamic revolution in Iran, when the Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah, attacked Western materialism, democratic pluralism, modernity, scientific method, the concept of progress, imposing a theocracy and *Shariah* law, including strict observance of Islamic principles, traditions and punishments, such as stoning and amputation.

Margaret Thatcher’s election victory in the U.K. in May 1979 repudiated bipartisan support for Keynesian economic policy, replacing it with market fundamentalism. She also attacked ‘the public sphere’ (such as public education or public health), and emphasised ‘the private sphere’, marking the end of a generation of consensus politics. She famously declared: ‘There is no such thing as society... there are individual men and women and families.’

In 1980 Ronald Reagan, advocating similar policies, was elected President of the United States.

Khomeini and Thatcher shared four fundamentalist elements: a conviction of infallibility, scepticism about ‘progress’, a commitment to absolutes and an invoking of the Manichean contest between Good and Evil. Ronald Reagan described the USSR and its allies as an ‘evil empire’ in 1983 and George W. Bush dubbed Iraq, Iran and North Korea as ‘the axis of evil’ in 2002.

Thatcher’s approach was often summarised by the acronym ‘TINA (‘There is no alternative’.)

In **1989** the Berlin Wall came down – in the year of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French Revolution – and the Communist system in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe began to implode.

By **1991** the USSR had been formally dissolved. Only one economic model was left standing in the world: triumphant capitalism and the doubtful assumption that it invariably promoted democracy. All values became economic and all goals material.

'Left' politics was deemed obsolete, 'Democratic Socialism' was not longer talked about and the lack of an alternative model of society drained politics of idealism, replacing it with a narrow commitment to economic self-advancement. Hawke and Keating worked, with some success to achieve a middle ground, in which social values remained important and they were good on the environment. But Tony Blair's New Labour gave up on the word 'equality', which dropped from the lexicon.

**1994** was the year when Tim Berners-Lee's concept of the WorldWideWeb (WWW) became generally available and took off exponentially. It was an area outside Gough Whitlam's repertoire. He was obsessed by the search for evidence, but from traditional, paper-based sources.

A fundamental mistake was made by many writers, myself included, about the impact of the IT revolution. We assumed that access to new technology would open people up to the world – that people would be seeking out the universal and long term. Instead, technologies such as the iPhone, have reinforced the realm of the personal, as exhibited in social media, with its emphasis on the immediate and the personal, concentrating on family and close friends, reinforcing existing views. The iPhone has changed social relationships perhaps more than any other single technology (even the car) and has become the new best friend, the last thing seen and touched at night, the first thing seen and touched in the morning. (Wearing dark glasses, even in reduced light, probably encourages self-absorption.)

This has weakened our sense of, or empathy with, 'the other', the remote, the unfamiliar, and all but destroyed our sense of community, being members of a group. Now individualism is not just the primary motivator, but the only one.

**2001** was marked by the *Tampa* incident, which transformed Australian politics, and Labor cravenly supported the Howard Government, adopted the 'small target' policy and stopped talking about human rights. After September 11, 2001 after al-Qaida's attack on the Twin Towers in Manhattan, Labor took a low profile on security issues, although it drew the line at offering support for the Bush-Blair-Howard invasion of Iraq in 2003.

**2015.** The mass movement of refugees from the Middle East, Syrians being part of the latest wave, is causing political shock waves throughout the world. It has created the absurd, perhaps even obscene, spectacle of politicians saying, in coded language, we have to repudiate humane democratic practice in order to protect democratic values.

In the UK election (May 2015), UKIP won 12.6% of the vote. The British Labour Party is in very bad shape. There have been significant increases in

votes for the ‘hard right’ on immigration issues in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary. Social Democrats used to dominate Scandinavia – now they are in opposition in Norway and Denmark, in a coalition in Sweden.

Justin Trudeau’s victory in Canada has been encouraging, but it should be noted that the New Democratic Party (NDP), the ALP’s nearest counterpart, won just 19.6% of the vote.

The prospects for the United States Presidential election in 2016 are alarming, especially on the Republican side.

## **Party and Parliament**

In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s four controversial figures changed the face of the ALP: Gough Whitlam, Don Dunstan, Lionel Murphy and Jim Cairns, but of the quartet Gough proved to be dominant. Whitlam and Dunstan shared a wary respect, but operated in different spheres, with a high degree of policy overlap. While Cairns and Murphy shared a deep suspicion of Whitlam, Murphy hoped to be able to transfer to the House of Representatives (as John Gorton had done) and become Leader, so he saw Cairns as a potential rival. On many major issues, such as White Australia, multiculturalism, the death penalty, Aboriginal rights, censorship, affirmative action and gender issues, all four agreed. Whitlam and Murphy disagreed about the role of the Senate: Whitlam saw it as essentially a house of review, with inferior powers to the House of Representatives, while Murphy had higher expectations. Cairns and Murphy resisted Whitlam on modernizing the Party structure and transforming the Victorian Branch.

I knew Whitlam best of all, but had a long friendship with Dunstan, spoke at Murphy’s memorial service and succeeded Cairns as MHR for Lalor.

In the 1970s there were other powerful figures making an impact on the ALP: Bob Hawke, President of the ACTU and Prime Minister-in-waiting, Bill Hayden, a powerful autodidact, Mick Young, National Secretary, later a Minister under Hawke. One could add the scholarly but detached Kim Beazley, Sr., and Clyde Cameron, a powerful debater, remorseless antagonist and assiduous historian. That’s nine in the 1960s-70s.

Can we, in this decade, identify nine current Labor politicians with equivalent intellectual power and persistence? I doubt it. We could all come up with two or three names, but they would all be contestable. Hawke and Keating stood out – still stand out – in the 1980s and 1990s, and they had formidable Ministers around them: Hayden, Button, Evans, Blewett, Dawkins, Duffy, Kerin, Willis, Young. Where are their contemporary counterparts?

In Whitlam's Cabinet (32 in all) there were seven lawyers (Whitlam, Murphy, Bowen, Enderby, Wheeldon, Jim McClelland, Joe Berinson), four former State MPs (Crean, Bowen, Connor, Grassby), two academics (Cairns, Patterson), three teachers (Barnard, Beazley, Bryant), two medical practitioners (Everingham, Cass), two retailers (Uren, Johnson), a diplomat (Morrison), a policeman (Hayden), a sportsman (Stewart), a shorthand reporter (Doug McClelland), a sailor (Wreidt.)

None had been a 'minder' – indeed the concept and the term did not exist in 1972-75.

None had been party officials.

Nine had been trade union officials at some time (Fred Daly, Don Willesee, Charlie Jones, Reg Bishop, Jim Cavanagh, Joe Riordan, Les Johnson, Paul Keating) but some had worked in other areas, for example Jones as Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Johnson as a retailer. Most of the trade union officials had actually worked in the relevant industry, not (like Craig Thomson) recruited from outside for head office, and then bumped into Parliament by their factions. There was not much evidence of a revolving door.

There were no women in Whitlam's Cabinet. In 1972 there were no women in Caucus.. In the 1974 Double Dissolution, Joan Child (Victoria) was elected to the House of Representatives, Jean Melzer (Victoria) and Ruth Coleman (Western Australia) to the Senate. Not until 1983 did New South Wales elect a woman as MHR – Jeannette McHugh.

The first Hawke Government had 27 Ministers, 18 of them graduates, encompassing a great diversity of experience – lawyers, teachers, university academics, union and party officials, state parliamentarians, retailers, an economist, chartered accountant, policeman, meat wholesaler, farmer, locomotive-driver, medical practitioner, clergyman, shearer, waterside worker. (Several were in more than one category.) Susan Ryan became the first female Labor Minister. There was no necessary correlation between academic achievement and Ministerial effectiveness. Keating and Young were uncontaminated by tertiary education, and Walsh had enough exposure to confer lifelong immunity. The Ministry included three Rhodes Scholars, Bob Hawke (1953), Neal Blewett (1957) and Kim Beazley (1973), and another distinguished Oxford graduate, Gareth Evans. Four of Hawke's Ministers had served in the Whitlam Government, Hayden, Bowen, Uren and, briefly, Keating.

The composition of the first Hawke Cabinet is instructive, demonstrating that factional allegiances were not yet institutionalised. It was the last 'free vote' to be held in Caucus: all subsequent ballots have been 'managed'. Only five Ministers were aligned with the Right (Hawke, Bowen, Willis, Keating,

Evans), six – most of them former Hayden supporters – were non-aligned (Button, Hayden, Young, Walsh, Ryan, Scholes), one was a Left-leaning Tasmanian (Grimes) and the Left faction had a single representative (West). A few months later Dawkins (non-aligned, later active in the Centre Left) and Kerin (originally Left, then non-aligned, later reluctantly in the Right) were invited to join the inner sanctum. (I was never in Cabinet.) In February 1984 Bill Hayden formed the Centre Left faction, sometimes called the ‘Hayden Protection Society’.

Given current arrangements in the ALP about pre-selections for safe seats, it is unlikely that such a spread of talents would be available from the House of Representatives, let alone the Senate, where endorsement are mostly rewards for factional fidelity. I asked a number of Hawke’s Ministers if they believed that they could have won pre-selection for safe or winnable seats under existing factional arrangements, and received a series of ‘No’s’, from Hayden, Button, Evans, Grimes, Blewett, Dawkins, Kerin, Ryan, Walsh and Duffy. I would have answered ‘No’ too. All of us had a life outside the major factions and won pre-selection against them. It is not possible now.

In the 1970s trade union membership accounted for more than half the Australian labour force. The figure stood at 46 per cent in 1986 and has fallen in 2015 to 15 per cent in 2015, according to the ABS, 17 per cent according to the ACTU. The aggregate figures are in the band 1.6 > 1.8 million.

It is striking to note the difference in professional backgrounds of the Ministers in the Whitlam Government, the first Hawke Government and the current Shorten Opposition. The factional system, once essentially based on state differences, became organized nationally in the late 1980s and ‘non-aligned’ MPs were were squeezed out.

The creation of nation-wide factions in the late 1980s led to the ‘privatization’ of the Party in which faction leaders became traders and ‘conviction politics’ was replaced by ‘retail politics.’ The central question about policy was no longer ‘Is it right?’ but ‘Will it sell?’

Of the 30 Shadow Ministers (outer + inner) in the Shorten Opposition the professional breakdown is as follows: thirteen trade union officials (Bill Shorten, Penny Wong, Stephen Conroy, Tony Burke, Kim Carr, Katy Gallagher, Mark Butler, Kate Ellis, Richard Marles, Brendan O’Connor, Claire Moore, Stephen Jones, Doug Cameron, Amanda Rishworth), eleven Minders (note some doubling up here: Tanya Plibersek, Jenny Macklin, Michelle Rowland, Jason Clare, Joel Fitzgibbon, Jim Chalmers, Sharon Bird, Carr, Conroy, Burke, Ellis), Party officials (Anthony Albanese, Gary Gray, David Feeney, Julie Collins), three former State or territory MPs (Chris Bowen, Burke, Gallagher), three practising lawyers (Mark Dreyfus, Shayne Neumann, ,Michelle Rowland: Wong had been a lawyer, too), one academic

economist (Andrew Leigh), one consultant (Catherine King), one Mayor (Bowen.)

One might have thought that as membership of trade unions contracted, then its share of positions would have fallen. Not at all. There is an inverse relationship. As Party membership becomes ageing and vestigial, one might expect that the role of Party officials would be less dominant. But it is greater. Odd, that.

Voters are (so far) loyal to the major parties on polling day but many cast their vote with pegs on their noses – and they have no interest in joining parties. Our major parties are claimed to have a total membership (on paper anyway) of about 80,000 – that is, about 0.6% of voters. In reality, it is more likely to be less than 30,000, not all of whom will know that they hold party tickets.

By contrast, total membership of sporting, especially football, clubs would be somewhere north of 800,000 – a differentiation of 1:10 (or 1:26.)

### **Choice v. no-choice**

James Walter in *Tunnel Vision: the failure of political imagination* (1996) argues that political debate depends on having alternative points of view. If a government says that our economic future depends on growth, by which they mean consumption, including junk food and gambling, while investment in research, environmental protection or heritage is seen in negative terms, as a cost. The Opposition is eager to assert that it will go for growth too, the opportunity for discussion is crowded out.

He wrote: ‘When debate is superseded by monistic convictions we are told that there are no options. This is in effect a veto on politics....Politics was driven off the agenda...There was only one idea: that Australians must respond to the dictates of the international market. It was a time of prescription to, rather than dialogue with, the community.’

If, as is obvious, there is a united front between the major parties on issues such as asylum seekers or foreign policy, then voters will have to be reminded that (as Talleyrand remarked), ‘not to choose *is* to choose’ and that Australia is – like the U.S. – becoming a one party state in which Coalition and Opposition are essentially two wings of the same bird.

For Australian voters, it is like choosing between Coles and Woolworths.

At present, Australia is ruled by a Grand Alliance which refuses to engage in serious examination of, say, climate change, planning for a post carbon economy, education reform, rethinking foreign policy, securing an appropriate

revenue base for an ageing society with increasingly sophisticated health needs and the shadow of Alzheimer's.

Paradoxically, we now have the best educated cohort of Australians in our history, with 4.5 million graduates, 15 times more than we had in the 1970s, but in recent years our public discourse has fallen abysmally.

There are inbuilt tensions between the nature of major challenges and attempts to understand them or address them.

- 'Wicked problems', messy, complex, contradictory, a challenge to linear thinking and with no 'stopping rule', including climate change, ageing, jihadism, foreign policy, taxation are very long term issues;
- Our political cycles are short term (three year Parliaments for the Commonwealth, three or four for the States);
- Media cycles are very short term (news editors get very tired of a story after 24 hours or so);
- Social media is shorter still (turn round times measured in minutes, if not seconds.) Understanding complex issues is outside the range of social media where the emphasis, for example with twittering, is on immediate reaction, in 140 characters or less.

Steve Biddulph wrote that 'it has been said that we have palaeolithic bodies, neolithic brains, medieval institutions and modern problems.' I suspect that this is a half-remembered variant of Harvard biologist E O Wilson's conclusion that humans have 'Palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions and God-like technologies.'

### **Whitlam and the Turnbull factor**

I can see a few parallels between Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Turnbull. Both had/ have a certain grandeur, an Olympian detachment, a gift for rhetoric and sly humour, talking in whole sentences, using verbs, aiming at the HCF rather than the LCM, unpredictable, avoiding mantras or zingers ('It's Time' being an honourable exception. Neither would be seen on television draped in flags, wearing hard hats or fluorescent vests, on their bikes or in budgie-smugglers.

The Abbott style deformed Australian politics, and trapped Labor, destroying two leaders and damaging another. Somehow the ALP appeared to feel compelled to match Abbott blow for blow, slogan for slogan, zinger for zinger.

The ALP has not yet adapted to the transition from Abbott to Turnbull. The substance of the Turnbull Government's policy has not changed very much –

he is wedged by his conservative rump in the Liberal back bench and the National Party – but the style is changing every day.

2015 was going to be the year of policy renewal for the ALP. I have not seen much evidence of it. The National Conference adopted the Abbott policy on turning back the boats and keeping Manus Island and Nauru open and we hope to keep taxes low enough so that workers can choose to send their children to private schools. We proposed lowering the voting age – but the community response seems underwhelming. We maintain resolute opposition to democratising the Party, so that control remains with the factions as self-perpetuating oligarchies.

However, the Parliamentary leadership is showing stronger commitment to climate change policy. I hope this is a matter of conviction rather than a reaction to internal party polling, and fear of the Greens.

One of the most troubling features of the present ALP has been its incapacity to win an argument on policy.

The last major debate on a contested issue that the ALP won was WorkChoices in 2007. We won in the short term on climate change, but then lost it. We won on NDIS, but (except on points of detail) it was uncontested. The Rudd Government never gained the credit it deserved for taking Australia through the GFC, maintaining its international AAA credit rating throughout and being praised by the IMF, the World Bank and Joe Stiglitz. Did we achieve a great success or had the Government ‘lost its way’?

I concede that with votes from cross benchers in the Senate, Labor has been able to block some unpalatable Budget measures, the repeal of s. 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act and elimination of the renewable energy target.

Labor’s most spectacular failure on arguing a case was on climate change.

Kevin Rudd promised to act, but, after panicking at Copenhagen in 2009, failed to do so. Julia Gillard promised, unwisely, in 2010, not to act, then did so. Voters punished the Party.

The environment used to be high on the political agenda – but now it is rarely talked about in political circles. The current mantra is ‘Jobs!, Jobs!, Jobs!’, which often means, in practice, a conviction that work in the future will be essentially what it has been in past generations, an extremely unlikely proposition. Labor was hesitant about restricting logging of old-growth forests (because local jobs were involved) but took a strong stand against Japanese whaling in the southern oceans. In 1983 Labor won a national election, in part, because of its opposition to damming some Tasmanian

wilderness areas. Would Labor have handled a similar issue the same way in 2013? I am not confident that it would.

It is clear that climate change is very important to most Labor voters and it could be the one issue that could carry us over the line in 2016 if the Coalition remains paralysed.

## **Conclusion**

Whitlam was a great enlarger – a man of huge vision and capacity and we were all enriched (even if sometimes exasperated) by his life and work.

At 98, his death was long expected, but the funeral had an extraordinary impact. He did not want to die while Tony Abbott was Prime Minister.

Under Abbott, Labor Shadow Ministers would moan: ‘We’d like to be more courageous but we can’t. It’s all so hard.’

This illustrates Anne Manne’s useful coinage ‘exclusionary consensus.’

Don Watson wrote, in *The Monthly*, on the Whitlam commemorative service in the Sydney Town Hall:

[N]o one from the modern generation of Labor spoke... Gough Whitlam could not exist in modern Labor or modern politics. Ideological differences are just a part of it. The man was too eloquent, too erudite, too civilised to fit. Now crassness rules. We have message, not speech. If you want speech, get Noel Pearson or Cate Blanchett or one of the party’s ‘elder statesmen’, John Faulkner or Graham Freudenberg, to do the talking for you.

The event reminded us that there was a time, and there was a Leader who could transform Australian society – shatter old beliefs, look towards transcendent possibility and tell a story to be proud of.

Are we up to the challenge of struggling for that objective?