

Gough Whitlam, A Moment in History

By Jenny Hocking: The Miegunyah Press, Mup, Carlton Victoria, 2008,
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Jenny Hocking is, as the media release on this book states, an acclaimed and accomplished biographer and this book does not disappoint. It is well written and well researched. My only real complaint is that it should be clearer in the title that it only concerns half of Gough Whitlam's life, from birth to accession the moment of the 1972 election. It is not about Whitlam as prime minister or the rest of his life. While there are many books about Whitlam's term as prime minister, I hope that Jenny Hocking will make this book one of a matched pair, take us through the next period; and that Gough is still with us to see the second half of his life told with the interest and sensitivity that Jenny Hocking has brought to this first part.

Given that this is a review in the *Australasian Parliamentary Review* it seems appropriate to concentrate a little of some of the parliamentary aspects of this wide ranging book.

Before I do that I would like to pay my respects to the role Margaret Whitlam played in the story. Jenny Hocking handles Margaret's story with a light, subtle touch and recognizes her vital part in Gough's capacity to do all that he did. It is Margaret who raised the children and truly made their home; and then emerges as a fully independent woman and a full partner to Gough. The tenderness of their relationship is indicated by what I consider a lovely quote from Margaret about their first home after their marriage.

We didn't get a double bed because Gough said, 'When I'm away you'll miss me too much.' So we had twin beds pushed together. Then when he wasn't there I'd push them apart. (p84)

The book also takes us through all the machinations of the Labor Party in its full glory and horrors, bringing to life the faction fights, as well as the risks and skills Gough took and displayed in emerging as leader of the party and in modernizing the party both organizationally and in policy terms. These changes allowed the party to succeed electorally, first in the 1969 election when it made the great gains in seats and showed that the Australian people would vote Labor federally, and then of course in 1972 when Labor came to power. The 1969 success cannot be stressed too strongly. Hocking quotes Race Mathews and Jim Cairns:

It is almost impossible for anybody not of that generation to imagine how dysfunctional the Labor Party had become ... People ... had come to see the party as essentially a party of protest. ... That spell was broken by the '69 result. ... Mr Whitlam had passed the test of leadership'.

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Somewhat depressingly it also shows the utterly recalcitrant nature of the NSW ALP organization, described succinctly as having an 'impenetrable structure' (p359). Alas, looking from 2009 nothing seems to have changed in that regard.

Somewhat mischievously I enjoyed enormously the quotes Jenny Hocking has used to demonstrate the vindictive nature of some of Australia's political leaders, from both sides of politics. For example, Billy Snedden, Attorney-General and Minister for Immigration in the Holt government, is quoted as fearing that the Liberal party would 'fall into the hands' of John Gorton and Malcolm Fraser (which of course happened). Snedden is quoted as describing these two as 'men of immense immorality. I can't express how much contempt I had for the two of them at the time. ... Fraser is still a lying, thieving, cheating, stealing man'. (p304). In the political backstabbing that followed the death of Prime Minister Harold Holt, one of the contenders, Paul Hasluck described another of the Liberal Party's future prime ministers, Billy McMahon as 'disloyal, devious, dishonest, untrustworthy, petty, cowardly ... a contemptible creature.' (p305).

Labor was capable of equal spleen about its own. In 1966 Whitlam in a TV interview described the federal executive as 'incompetent and irresponsible'; he also described them as '12 witless men'. The next day Whitlam was charged by the federal executive with gross disloyalty, the penalty of which was expulsion. The NSW member, Cliff Mallam released a press statement in which he accused Whitlam of 'a very advanced condition of Bonapartism' (p254).

Whitlam also did not spare members of the Opposition; in a memorable night Whitlam effectively ended Sir Garfield Barwick's political career with his attacks. 'Whitlam's ... ability to inflict the great damage with a cruel, careful barb was never better shown than (in his use of) those devastating two words "truculent runt". Barwick fell back, defeated ... led from the chamber, weeping'. (p212).

The vast policy changes Whitlam fought for which utterly changed the political agenda are also brought to light vividly, highlighting again the revolutionary nature of Whitlam in the politics of the period. In telling this story the negative impact of Sir Robert Menzies is revealed, especially, but not exclusively, in his attitudes on indigenous rights and self determination for post-colonial nations. The intra-ALP battles by Whitlam over State Aid to schools in need whether they be public or Catholic, an issue which had crippled the ALP, as had White Australia, over recognition of China, policy towards US bases in Australia, foreign policy generally, education generally are all here in this book. Also stressed was his deep concern for the Aboriginal people, a concern developed during his time in the RAAF when he was stationed at Cooktown and Gove. His assessment of the impact on the missions on Aboriginal culture is ruthless, having no time for any religion.

... missionaries taught Aborigines that they were Godless, they were heathens, made them feel inferior ... They destroyed Aborigines' self respect' (p103)

Neglected a little however is Whitlam's commitment to changing the nature of the isolation and sterility of what the developers had done to Australia's suburbs. He himself described his 1972 electoral success as having been achieved through 'roads, sewers and gutters'. Whitlam's recognizes the impact of his early experience, as a boy, of the differences between 'Canberra where every suburb had schools and roads and sewerage, and the Sydney suburb of Turramurra where he had lived, and where there was no sewerage'. (p48)

Because I am fascinated by Whitlam's downfall, the long story of his attitude towards the Senate is very revealing. As early as 1947 he wrote of the inappropriate nature of an upper house.

The theory in English-speaking countries is that absolute power reposes in the hands of the people's elected representatives ... democracies do not need to be saved from themselves'. (p115)

He was implacably opposed to the emergence of an active, powerful Senate which had started in about 1968. 'The Senate was unrepresentative, undemocratic and offended his view of parliament as an expression of popular will through a universal franchise and votes of equal value.' (p324)

He wanted the Senate abolished and even achieved a 'paper victory' from the Party in that it became Party policy to abolish the Senate. However as Hocking tellingly remarks, 'Gough Whitlam ... would ignore this revitalized Senate at his peril.' (p365).

He had also failed to recognize the full nature of the man who was to play the major role in his downfall, Malcolm Fraser. Well before the advent of the Whitlam government Fraser had shown his willingness to use the position of the governor-general to further his ends, and his political scheming. In a knock-down fight with the then Prime Minister, John Gorton, Fraser sent his resignation, not to the Prime Minister but to the Governor-General, stating that 'If the Minister's resigning, he's not going to give his prime minister prior notice so that he gets sacked' (p369). This was in Jim Killen's words as unusual interpretation of the constitutional responsibilities of the Governor-General 'if it is taken to mean the Governor-General of the day has some active power in the resigning of Ministers' (p370).

While it is easy to rewrite history to see portents and signs of future disasters I don't think it is unreasonable to point out that, ultimately, Whitlam has misunderstood the nature of Malcolm Fraser, the potency of the reserve powers of the Governor-General when combined with a ruthless opponent, and the growing power and arrogance of the Senate. While not ignoring Whitlam's own misjudgements in policy and political affairs, Malcolm Fraser, the governor-general and the Senate were the building blocks of Whitlam's demise in 1975. It is a delight to have so many of the early indicators of future storms well described and analysed in this book.

My one hesitation about this biography is that despite the excellent job done in describing Whitlam's family, his early life, his schooling, brilliance, war years, political awakenings and his political life through to 1972, the book still does not give me a 'feel' of Whitlam in terms of his persona and personality, vanity and kindness, the 'magic' he brought to Australian politics and his capacity to inspire a generation with a new view of what Australia could be.

It may be that it was the only young people who were wrapped up in the excitement of the years of Whitlam's leadership who attribute such characteristics to Gough, and that I exaggerate because, despite his flaws, Whitlam was 'my' prime minister in terms of my coming to age politically and because I have always liked and admired him and Margaret enormously.

Putting this comment aside then, I commend this book to you and as wonderful insight into the period, into the endless conniving of the political parties and political actors, and into the 'making of Gough'. ▲