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**The Whitlam Era, edited by Scott Prasser and David Clune. Connor Court Publishing, 2022, pp 480. RRP \$54.95, ISBN: 9781925826944.**

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As a keen reader of Australian political history and biography, I see two uniquely defining features of the political life and times of Gough Whitlam – the ongoing generation of a plethora of analysis, biography and critique, and the consensus that the times were a pivot in national political history – for good or bad.

First a declaration: as a child of the 1960s I am heavily influenced by the rise and burn of Gough. It coincides with a time of personal maturing, social awareness, rebellion, popular culture, political awakening, and youthful naivety. If only the older, conservative generation were to be moved on, ‘m-m-my generation’ (to quote the Who) had the answers for the future. I am, though, also a long-term public servant and urban policy advocate which is a key to my reading of any new anthology.

*The Whitlam Era*, edited by Scott Prasser and David Clune, published to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1972 election, appears at first sight to be another compilation to broaden the library shelf. However, on a closer look, this volume takes a refreshingly different approach to the usual dissection. It draws the reader from that era to the present.

Each fulsome chapter is tackled by a wide range of historians, commentators and, in some cases, direct policy participants of the time or with experience of the span from that era to today.

Clune in his *Overview* chapter captures the essence of the Whitlam ascendancy, from firstly the transformation of the old Labor Party and then the political landscape of the nation after the 1972 election. Whilst not the focus of the anthology, Clune has insight into what was happening to the likes of a young ‘boomer’, like me: becoming politically aware of a new world through media, education, communication and popular culture

and protest. His Wordsworth quote – ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven!’ is most apt.<sup>1</sup>

Surely, there has not since, nor possibly before, been such a lasting and memorable campaign launch speech than those of Gough Whitlam in 1972 – the dawning of a new era indeed.

The chapter from Greg Melleuish, *The Whitlam Narrative*, captures the zeitgeist and paradox very well - although the weight of evidence as to whether Mellheuish’s suggestion that Whitlam was not a ‘strong harbinger of progress’ is largely countered by many of the other chapters.

As Clune, Andrew Podger, David Stanton and others throughout the book point out the Whitlam legacy was ‘complex and contradictory ... left a slow burn ... that redefined politics and policy’.<sup>2</sup> The anthology succeeds in providing a deeper perspective on how relevant those legacies are to the challenges of policy today.

The essays follow a familiar logical deconstruction of the big policy agenda from 1972-75. It is prescient that the structure of each chapter provides an echo of that era for considering the issues facing us in 2023 and beyond. This marks *The Whitlam Era* as a valuable resource base to anyone involved in generating and delivering policy today, or anyone with a keen interest to better consider how lessons from a truly disruptive time can throw light on our thinking today.

The approach taken allows each author to structure their contribution around: hindsight of success, failure and struggle of each initiative; insight as to how and why each issue was tackled within the polity and bureaucracy of the time; and foresight as to what may be the legacy signpost to considering contemporary impact of the respective initiatives have had – or could have – on contemporary federal government in Australia.

As a former public servant, albeit in state bureaucracy in SA, and a senior national policy advocate for a peak industry body, I was particularly drawn to the way the authors explored and assessed the bold, headstrong agenda of the Whitlam government, and how – with mixed success - it was received, managed and delivered by an often stolid, long term public service structure. It was disrupted by the introduction of a new

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Prasser & David Clune (eds), *The Whitlam Era*, Connor Court Publishing, 2022, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Prasser & Clune, *The Whitlam Era*, p. 21.

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generation of policy players and outsiders with very different backgrounds to a civil servant class that had, like the governments of the Menzies Liberals and his contemporaries, largely been drawn from a monochrome career pool.

The chapters from Martha Kinsman and Linda Hort on education, Will Sanders on aboriginal affairs and, particularly, that by Paddy Gourley on the public service are especially insightful of the wrestle of political zeal and high policy ambition through the insertion of energy, commitment and naivety from a new generation as they grappled with the structural inertia of a public service from another time. The struggles at both federal and state levels in these and many of the other sectors are a fascinating feature of *The Whitlam Era*.

In addition to my career in the public and private policy and project area, professionally I am a keen advocate of urban policy and its varied landscape history of political commitment, excitement, neglect and atrophy at the federal level. In that regard I was particularly drawn to John Martin's essay *Legacy and Lessons from the DURD Project*.

Martin has set out in concise forensic detail the context, significance, impact and influence of the Whitlam 'episode' of engagement by the federal government in urban affairs. His analysis makes a strong case to suggest this was the most significant emphasis on how the health and efficacy our cities, regions and communities underpin the making of a nation. How the inter-connectiveness of built form, physical and social infrastructure, and private and public investment through co-ordinated urban policy is fundamental for Australia.

Under Whitlam, this was manifest through DURD ((Department of Urban and Regional Development). Like many of the other chapters, Martin has detailed the external influences of the urban agenda on the Whitlam Government with a view as to how the 'sausage was made' within the federal, state and even local government bureaucratic structures – and the political capital that the Whitlam Government was prepared to expend to deliver its ambitious plans and projects. As a young town planner graduate of the time Hugh Stretton's *Ideas for Australian Cities* clearly shaped a generation of urban thinkers like me, as well as influencing Whitlam, Uren and their policy advisors.

Many retrospectives of the Whitlam government contain a list of the 15-20 short term policy changes introduced in the first whirlwind days of 1972-73. Martin has included

an equally impressive list from Pat Troy's speech in 1992<sup>3</sup> and follows up with David Wilmoth's 2021 memoir list<sup>4</sup> to powerfully demonstrate the impact on urban policy achieved by DURD. Whilst the next flowering of federal policy through Brian Howe and Building Better Cities in the 1990's followed this lead, it is hard to identify any current commitment at the DURD level of enthusiasm in any other national government or opposition party since.

Two other observations of Martin's essay come to mind. Firstly, his reference to Gough and Tom Uren's contrasting upbringing in showing how two distinctively different experiences can come together in a common idea is interesting. Tom Uren's autobiography *Straight Left* is one of the most compelling political and inspiring biographies that I have read.

Secondly Martin touches on the diaspora of young, idealistic and enthusiastic DURD and other public servants after 1975. Nowhere was this more of impact than in South Australia at the time and I had the personal privilege to have been influenced by a number of these people, particularly Ian McPhail, John Mant and Andrew Strickland. They and others meant that a full understanding of the legacies of the Whitlam era needed to be considered through a wide lens.

In a most crowded field, *The Whitlam Era* is a valuable retrospective. Perhaps more uniquely, it's a cleverly compiled thought-bridge on how we might assess the legacy and paradox of Gough Whitlam and his colleagues as we consider the view from the challenging platform we stand on today.

For me, this collection is less a judgement, more an insight that is best summed up by Podger and Stanton: policy foundations were built and youthful enthusiasm and naivety led to mistakes 'but it was an exciting time ... and an experience we would not have missed for quids!'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Prasser & Clune, *The Whitlam Era*, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Prasser & Clune, *The Whitlam Era*, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Prasser & Clune, *The Whitlam Era*, p. 90.