Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections edited by Michael Easson. Connor Court, 2026, xv+124 pp, RRP $34.95, ISBN: 9781923568815.

David Clune

David Clune is an Honorary Associate in the Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney

The anniversaries of the 1972 election and the Dismissal of the Whitlam Government[1] have seen the publication of a number of worthwhile books. This collection edited by Michael Easson is one of the more original. The aim is to encompass a broad range of personal reflections not only on the Dismissal itself but on Whitlam in general and his legacy for government and politics. Most of the essays are by people who lived through the events. Easson has chosen a wide range of well-qualified authors who bring contrasting, thought-provoking perspectives to their chapters. In his Introduction he notes:

> *This is not a celebratory, uncritical reckoning. Whitlam's memory and what his government and political battles meant for the nation, would be ill-served by mere sycophancy. The essays dwell on promise, disappointment, mistakes, grandeur and failure.*[2]

Easson poses the question: what was Whitlam? He aptly describes him as

[1] On 11 November 1975, after a series of dramatic events including a 1974 double dissolution and a budgetary supply crisis, the Gough Whitlam-led Labor government became the first – and only – federal government in Australian history to be dismissed by the Governor-General. See e.g. National Museum of Australia (4 December 2025). *Whitlam dismissal: 1975: Governor-General dismisses Whitlam government* available at <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/whitlam-dismissal>. For the background to these events see also T Bramston, *Whitlam: the vista of the new* (HarperCollins, 2026) and S Prasser and D Clune eds *The Whitlam Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy* ((Connor Court, 2022).

[2] 'Introduction' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections* (Connor Court, 2026), pp. 27-28.

> *both lodestar and crashed meteorite … creative and destructive, careful and impulsive, innovative and inspiring and reckless and disaster-prone … In office, Whitlam was transformational.*[3]

There is no doubt that Whitlam spectacularly crashed to earth like a flaming meteorite when he was dismissed by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in December 1975. Easson provides a good summary of the conflicting schools of thought on the validity of Kerr's actions:

> *Some scholars argue that [Kerr] acted within his reserve powers, while others contend that the Dismissal represented a profound breach of democratic norms. A middle ground is that Kerr was within his powers, but that he should have warned and counselled the Prime Minister of his thinking.*[4]

Frank Bongiorno and James Watson point out that the Dismissal has proved in retrospect not to be the apocalyptic event that many prophesised at the time:

> *The nation left the Dismissal behind, tucked away in the back of the wardrobe along with safari suits, flared trousers, wide collars and other unfashionable legacies of the 1970s … The idea that the events of November 1975 might carry deeper meaning for one's judgements about the quality of Australian democracy seemed to be less in evidence as the years passed.*[5]

Ironically, one of the reasons why the Dismissal proved to be less of a political watershed than many anticipated was because Bob Hawke and a new generation of Labor MPs saw the political disasters of the Whitlam Government as something to be avoided at all costs. Bongiorno observes that the nature of Australian democracy has not basically changed since the turbulence of 1975 and, in fact, its stability is now more popularly, if superficially, celebrated. He warns against a dangerous complacency: 'We would do well to regard it with a more critical eye, and a more careful vigilance, than has become fashionable'.[6]

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[3] 'Introduction' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 2.

[4] 'Introduction' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 15.

[5] 'The Dismissal from below' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 33.

[6] 'The Dismissal from below' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 50.

Ros Kelly gives a personal account of what it was like to be a young, carefree ALP activist in the Whitlam era:

> *The Dismissal stayed entrenched in my memory and helped mould my future political career. Looking back now I can see I wasn't motivated by outrage or disappointment although I obviously felt both, especially with the results of the [1975] election which Labor so dramatically lost. I think it was more the value of seeing what an ALP government could do if we were in power … However, without the reforms of Gough Whitlam, there would have been no pathway for a woman like me … The Whitlam Government was pushing a very exciting agenda at a hectic pace, and we really did feel that Australia was entering a Brave New World. A world I wanted to be part of.*[7]

One of the effects of the Whitlam years was the beginning of the transformation of the ALP from a party of blue collar workers to one dominated by tertiary educated professionals.

Rod Wise's chapter is a powerful personal polemic. He was Secretary of the Werriwa Labor Federal Electorate Council, Whitlam's seat, and local campaign manager for the elections of the 1970s. A by-election was held in 1973 in the seat of Parramatta which the ALP had come very close to winning in 1972. In an extraordinary lapse of political judgement, Whitlam had announced just before the poll that Sydney's second airport would be built at Galston in the Parramatta electorate. It was a bitter campaign marked by personal attacks on the Prime Minister. Unsurprisingly, the ALP lost by a significant margin. From his close association with Whitlam at this time, Wise believes the by-election defeat 'seriously undermined Whitlam's belief in himself as the spearhead of the modernising impulse to reform Australia'[8]. Although Whitlam was narrowly re-elected in 1974 he became 'a mere shadow of what he had been: the most effective opposition leader in living memory' (between 1967 and 1972), a tribute flowing from the synthesis of a uniquely comprehensive policy programme and his extraordinary capacity to engage with the broadest reaches of society. However, by the time of the Dismissal he was 'tired, exhausted by the turmoil of reckless and ill-disciplined ministers and the tribulations of governing'.[9]

Wise is one of those who is disillusioned with the modern ALP and nostalgic about the Camelot of the Whitlam era:

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[7] 'What November 11th in 1975 meant personally' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p69.

[8] 'Confessions of a Labor has-been' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 148.

[9] 'Confessions of a Labor has-been' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 148.

> *Today I look back on 50 years from the demise of the Whitlam government and find that our kids cannot even afford to buy their own family homes. There are now the Haves, the Have yachts, and the rest. How can Labor be satisfied with the non-egalitarian nation it now presides over? Today's Australia it is quite sobering to observe, is a long way from the optimism that Whitlam Labor once promised in those stirring days of distant memory.*[10]

In his chapter, David Kemp launches a swingeing attack on Whitlam and his record, describing it as 'one of the worst governments in Australia's history'.[11]

> *The record shows that Whitlam made fundamental errors in choosing his policy priorities, in his strategy of reform and in the design of major initiatives and his most ambitious reforms largely failed to achieve the outcomes he sought. Despite great ambition and even bolder claims, the Whitlam government became an example of how not to reform Australian policy to achieve improved economic opportunity, social justice, or a more democratic country.*[12]

Kemp argues that many of Whitlam's reforms built on the legacy of previous Coalition governments. The McMahon government effectively ended Australia's commitment of troops to the Vietnam war. Australia's engagement with Asia was begun by the Coalition's reopening of relations with Japan. Menzies largely dismantled the White Australia policy.

In terms of 'achievements', the Whitlam government's economic incompetence 'promoted inflation, increased joblessness, discouraged enterprise, made home buying more expensive, [and] stirred industrial conflict'.[13] Whitlam's commitment to empower ordinary Australians in the decision-making process was undermined by centralised power given to technocrats:

[10] 'Confessions of a Labor has-been' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 160.

[11] 'Whitlam and Menzies: reform legacies' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 80.

[12] 'Whitlam and Menzies: reform legacies' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 78.

[13] 'Whitlam and Menzies: reform legacies' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 84.

> *The strengthening of administrative capacity to over-turn decisions, was actually gifting power to non-elected officials, weakening the accountability of elected representatives.*[14]

In other key reform target areas:

> *Despite needs-based funding of schools, basic skills levels of disadvantaged students remained stagnant … Despite the grant of free access to public hospitals and subsidised medical care, health outcomes among the most disadvantaged remained relatively poor … Despite free universities, benefits flowed principally to higher income citizens.*[15]

Scott Prasser provides at first-hand a perspective rarely written about: a small family firm trying to cope with the Whitlam government's mismanagement of the economy. In essence, this was why Australians abandoned Gough in droves in 1975. Prasser concludes:

> *If Fraser hadn't stared down Whitlam, who knows where the Prasser family and so many others like us would have ended up. Fifty years later it's still a thought that brings a shudder.*[16]

One of Australia's leading constitutional scholars, Anne Twomey, explores the war-gaming by the Government and Governor-General before the Dismissal. Intensive research by the public service into the likelihood and ramifications of a dismissal concluded that

> *the Governor-General could dismiss the government and appoint another to advise an election in extreme circumstances, such as when the survival of orderly government was in real jeopardy as a result of the Senate refusing to grant supply. It noted that in such a case it was not possible to suggest rules or principles the Governor-General should apply.*[17]

The public service advising canvassed various options for dealing with such a situation. According to Twomey, Whitlam preferred to follow his own view that

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[14] 'Whitlam and Menzies: reform legacies' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections,* p. 87.

[15] 'Whitlam and Menzies: reform legacies' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, pp. 78-79.

[16] 'Saving the Prassers from Whitlam' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p106.

[17] 'War-gaming the Dismissal' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p135.

> *Kerr would do as Whitlam told him and was too weak to act otherwise. It was this flawed psychological assessment and Whitlam's excessive confidence in his own judgement which outflanked all the war-gaming and preparations by the public servants. Whitlam was just not interested in considering the views of others.*[18]

Kerr's lack of adequate war-gaming meant that the success of his dismissal plan was

> *dependent upon the unlikely series of events that Whitlam would go home to lunch, not tell his Senators of his dismissal, and that none of the Labor Senators would think to use parliamentary procedures to prevent Supply being passed by the Senate. The success of Kerr's action was a consequence of good fortune, rather than good planning.*[19]*.*

Twomey concludes: 'Neither Whitlam nor Kerr proved to be the master tacticians they seemed to believe they were, leaving events to play out uncontrolled'.[20]

[18] 'War-gaming the Dismissal' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 135.

[19] 'War-gaming the Dismissal' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 142.

[20] 'War-gaming the Dismissal' in M Easson ed, *Whitlam Right and Wrong: personal reflections*, p. 142.